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Plight and Passion

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by Lisa B. Williams

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Chapter One.....	1
Chapter Two.....	19
Chapter Three.....	38
Chapter Four.....	44
Chapter Five.....	59
Chapter Six.....	66
Chapter Seven.....	80
Chapter Eight.....	93
Chapter Nine.....	104
Chapter Ten.....	115
Chapter Eleven.....	125
Chapter Twelve.....	136
Chapter Thirteen.....	155
Chapter Fourteen.....	190

Abstract

PLIGHT AND PASSION

By Lisa B. Williams

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014.

Major Director: Dr. John McCown, Professor of English, English Department.

The goal of this thesis is to bring to life the countless stories of oppression, perseverance, and hope of African-Americans during the early twentieth century. I used two settings, the rural South and the industrialized North, to reflect the different challenges of surviving and thriving during times of segregation. Buck Carrington, in Part I of the novel that is set in Virginia, is forced to confront not only his own personal demons of lust and intemperance, but also the vices of hatred and racism. In the end, he loses everything. His wife, Helen, decides to leave Buck, and she ventures to the city, to Harlem, which is the setting for Part II of this novel. As a woman with no education, she must forge a path to independence by working hard and attaining an education, and incidentally, she finds love and self-confidence in the process. I used dialect and vivid description to characterize each protagonist, Buck as wild and hot-tempered, and Helen as reserved and shy, but strong-willed. I also used historical references and allusions to place the

reader in the time period and to bring the many facets of African American culture and values to life.

Chapter One

Buck Carrington was a married man. A married man coming home, just in time for breakfast. His haggard appearance divulged his whereabouts. No need to wonder or to doubt where he had been for two days. Maybe the first time, but not now. His trousers were wrinkled and stained; his shirt tail hung out of the sides and back of his britches; coarse stubble rooted the chin and jaws of his coffee-colored face. He stank, of whiskey and tobacco. As he made his way down the stony path and up the porch steps, his wide nostrils flared to the familiar scent of downhome, Southern cooking that seeped through the kitchen window.

Calloused hands reached for and inadvertently slammed the ragged front door, ceasing the chatter in the next room. The only audible sound now was that of rotting floorboards, which creaked under his gait as he made his way through the parlor and into the small kitchen. With downcast eyes, avoiding the penetrating stares of his wife and mother, he studied the marks his muddy shoes made over the grooves of the linoleum from the doorway to the corner, where the shabby wooden cabinet stood.

“Boy, where in God’s name is you been?” his mother, Betty asked, lifting her broad frame from the table and ambling over to the tin bucket half full of suds. Wringing the soapy cloth and then kneeling to wipe up the mud he had just tracked over her clean floor, she continued, righteously shaking her head. Her large breasts shook, and her raspy voice broke to

the rhythm of her jerky movements. “I bet you—and Sammy Nash—done spent—all your money—on liquor—and them two half-white heiffas.”

Though never acknowledged or regarded with envy by any of the siblings, it was always obvious that he, her only son and her youngest of five, had reaped the most attention (and the most anguish) from Betty, for she was bent on preparing him to be a man in a world where he would always be perceived as less than one. Her efforts evolved into a complex, unbalanced combination of taking an iron skillet or the edge of a broomstick to his head when she deemed it necessary and waiting on him hand and foot and answering to his every whim otherwise.

Buck said nothing. His stolid air of silence made his wife shift uneasily from one side of her chair to the other. She eyed her husband, who had yet to greet her, who had a conscience that allowed him an appetite. He stood over the iron stove and scooped large helpings onto his plate. Gritting her teeth and rolling her eyes, she rushed out of the kitchen. The tail end of her robe whisked behind her as she stormed into the bedroom and slammed the loosely hinged door.

Helen’s reaction stung, though Buck did not wince. He casually took a seat at the small table, and in quick movements, lifted the fork to his mouth, not because he was insatiably hungry, but because he wanted to avoid his mother, who rose to stand over him with her chubby hands perched on her wide hips. Buck’s palms dampened from nervousness, like they did when he was a boy and about to receive a whipping. As a grown man, he found the lashes of Betty’s wise, unsparing tongue just as intimidating. He lost courage, confronted by his mother’s sternness.

“Buck,” she muttered, lowering her tone, “you mark my words, “don’t nothing good come from cheating on your wife and staying out all night. Don’t blame nobody but yourself when something terrible happen. You going against God’s word and breaking a commandment.”

She was silent for a moment and stooped again, scrubbing so hard the paper bag curlers in her head shook. Her voice broke to the pants of her labor. “Lord—knows, I—ain’t raise—no child—of mine—to act—like this!”

Buck secretly acknowledged his mother’s comment; she spoke the truth, always had. Since he was twelve and his father had passed away suddenly—from a mule kick to the head on the Stinell plantation—he knew she had done her best to raise him singlehandedly, forcing him to adapt to and live under feminine reign. His sisters too had thrown in their fair share of a helping hand—to pull him from the shadows of sin and darkness. Mimicking Betty, their primary influence, thus thinking of themselves authoritatively, he had had to fight off three domineering, mouthy sisters for his space, his privacy, and his autonomy. “Mannish!” his elder sister, Hazel Belle, had called him and run home to tell Betty that they had spied him feeling up the Perkins girls around back of the house. “Too big for his britches!” they had yelled when they spotted him gambling by the riverside with his cronies and dragged him home by the ear. Motherly instinct had come natural to them, for Betty, with the no-nonsense tactics of a slave driver, had turned out three hardworking daughters (the youngest dead from scarlet fever).

As a boy, Buck’s clothes were always mended and clean, his thick black hair was always slicked in promenade, and his dark brown face, knees, and elbows always glowed from the bit of lard she rubbed on them every morning before he left for the one-room schoolhouse. He envisioned the gnarl of her young, soft face, the color of cornmeal, as she rubbed her calloused hands over his smooth countenance. “The only thing worse than sun-burned, beet red white skin is ashy black. You black, but ain’t no excuse for ashy!”

Nothing Buck did missed Betty’s eye, even when her back was turned. “Sit up straight at the table,” she would say, busy washing dishes at the aluminum sink. He would stare in

amazement at the back of her head, her auburn hair tied up in an old house rag. “And don’t chew with your mouth open!” she would scold, still facing the corner. Buck had listened to her preachings and naggings so much that oftentimes they rang in his ears like a soft echo, the most repeated ones being, “Always ack like you got home training. They expect us to act like monkeys, you know. And when white folks mistreat you, suck it up and keep your mouth shut! I don’t ever want to pull my boy down from no tree!”

He tried to remember the latter each time Junior Stinell spat a jaw full of juicy snuff not an inch from his shoe and called him “boy” in that scoffing voice, the intense hatred turning his blue eyes to a shade of fiery violet. Buck tried to swallow his rebellion whole—nearly choking himself each time it went down—for the sake of survival. And he tried to understand Betty’s fears; he knew her brother had been pulled down from a rope years ago. A bold Negro who would not, could not, learn his place...ran off at the mouth one too many times. Buried in some unmarked lot now covered by weeds.

As a man, continuously doted on by his mother, Buck still ate three diligently prepared meals, wore hand-washed and thoroughly ironed work clothes, and had to do little more around the house than fetch well water and chop wood. Perhaps, Betty had spoiled him and catered to him so because she knew that beyond this shabby house on the hill there would be much cruelty her son would have to endure, many dreams that he would have to label as simply impossible to attain, and the thirst for many passions that he would have to squash or quench indirectly through substitution, (“making do,” she called it).

Sitting there in the kitchen, alone with his thoughts, not even a remnant of passion lurked in the irises of Buck’s coal black eyes, as he stared ahead at the dingy beige wall and lapped up the last of his fried apples with a piece of buttered biscuit. Exhausted and frustrated, Betty

sighed and lifted her heavy weight from her crouched stance—wiped her hands on her apron, wiping her hands of his foolishness. Stopping to rest, to think, she could not help but wonder if all those years spent raising him right had been spent in vain. “There’s some lemon meringue pie in the dish if you want it,” she added dryly, her tone leaving a trail of disappointment that lingered in the air. She hesitated, pursing her heart-shaped lips, and wiping the film of sweat from her wrinkled forehead. Unable to hold in even a penny of her two cents, she muttered in a hoarse whisper, “One day you gon’ stand naked in judgment before God Almighty and have to answer for your sins. What you gon’ say then? Ain’t no sweet-talking the Master, you know!”

Buck chuckled to himself, thinking of his mother standing and hollering stark naked, sagging breasts and buttocks, in front of heaven’s gate. “Let me in, God! I been a good and faithful servant! Done the best I could!”

Surely, she had served the white folks more than she could serve any God, more than she should ever have to. His thick ebony brows flexed, creasing the heavily-defined frown lines on his angular face, as he wondered if his Mama would have to scrub and wax the golden floors of glory down on her knees or flatiron the angels’ linens until her back stiffened and her knuckles ached. Would the Colored women in heaven have to walk five miles in the scorching heat to get to work, even after old age and a bad case of rheumatism set in?

Buck pondered and chewed in silence until his thoughts shifted to the familiar scent of cheap perfume that clung to his fingers as he lifted another biscuit to his mouth. Lady Bug. The woman who had kept him out all weekend. Smiling, his mind flooded itself with her image. Her thin pink lips spiraling down his chest with quick butterfly kisses. The plush parting of her supple, near-white thighs. Her squealing and moaning. Her golden brown hair tickling his torso afterwards.

He recounted the first time he had laid eyes on her—more than a year ago. He and Sammy Nash had hitched boat to the back of horse and wagon, journeying over the trek of high hills that separated two counties and two worlds of Negroes. “Going fishing,” he had told his mother. This region, visible only from certain angles of his mother’s house called “Up on the Ridge” was really no more than a valley, situated just amiss of the direct flow of the mouth of the James River. Everyone knew that anyone who resided in that section of the hills was either mulatto, quadroon, or closer than that to Caucasian. Some of them, upon first glance or even considerable scrutiny, could pass for white—until they spoke or walked or gave away some other hint of Negro mannerisms. Rumor had it that years ago a group of them had secured this small area and called it their own, discreetly guarding it.

Who could empathize or dare to understand their behavior? A people stuck in between, shunned by darker blacks and nearly all whites, they camouflaged their pain with an air of arrogance and superiority that only broadened the divisive gap. Their rule was—everybody could enter, but to dwell, and especially to breed, one had to pass the brown paper bag test. Held up and scrutinized beside the café-au-lait paper, those whose hands were darker by even a shade were cast aside. Those who loved and sought to marry a darker mate had to leave, but, of course, were welcome to return to visit. Betty Jordan, who had married Fleming Carrington, a man of soot black skin, never returned to those hills, though often, when in solitude, she looked out at them with a hardened heart from her bedroom window.

Lady Bug too conveyed this pale-complected aura of airs. Pretentiousness was heavily instilled by her mother, who had been content mating with a white man who would never claim her. But this veneer of superiority was not deeply rooted in the young girl’s heart. Still, she put on a good show for anybody who dared to watch.

Buck had watched and watched...until the veins in his thick ebony neck protruded as he slowly turned to hold his gaze, which was squinted from the glare of the bright sun. He hadn't even gotten a clear look at her face then; it was her walk that had first mesmerized him—slow, exaggerated, her head high, her perky bottom and breasts jutting out in opposite directions beneath her thin dress.

“What’s done caught your eye?” asked Sammy, holding the reins in a loose grip and glancing over at the back of Buck’s head.

“Damn,” Buck uttered, more to himself than to Sammy.

Curious, Sammy stretched his neck beyond Buck’s obtrusive frame.

“Okay. Now I see. That lil’ high yellow thang done blowed your nose wide open!”

“Damn,” Buck repeated, this time louder. “That’s ‘bout the purdiest girl I ever seen.

Look damn near white, ‘cept for them soft kinks in her hair.”

“Yeah, she is mighty purdy. But you just as well stick to looking. Most times them high yellow ones don’t give dark niggas a chance.”

“We’ll see ‘bout that...I bet you five dollars this be one dark one gon’ make ‘Miss High Yellow fall harder than she ever thought she could!”

“Fool, you ain’t got five dollars! Anyway, what ‘bout Helen? Two women is trouble, you know.”

“Ain’t gon’ be no trouble. It’s a whole lotta hills separating them two. They’ll never know ‘bout each other. Now, turn this here piece-a wagon ‘round so I can talk to her.”

“Okay,” replied Sammy, pulling the reins. “But you’s a fool if you think that. Women got a way of finding out. Sometimes they ain’t even got to see or hear. They just know.”

Damn if she didn't know—no matter how cleverly he had tried to cover his tracks. An echo danced in Buck's ear—"Son, don't you ever forget, what's done in the dark will always come to light!"

Light came like a bolt, shocking Buck, who had sat, rocking in a chipped wooden swing under a dogwood tree in front of Helen's folks' run-down shack. The crickets chirped the melody of his light heart and free spirit.

"Buck," Helen whispered. It had taken her a while to divulge her thoughts. She peered over at the dewy grass that had grown taller than the blossoms of her mother's petunia garden. She paused again. Buck studied the waves of her thick black mane and waited. "You seeing somebody else, ain't you?"

"No," Buck lied, numb from Sammy's words, now ringing true, the kisses of Lady Bug barely dry on his chapped lips. Though his right temple pulsed, he breathed easily.

"Well, I'll tell you one thing," she said, suddenly loosening her grip on his rough hand, "if you is, you can forget about me 'cause I ain't putting up with no shit." Buck's narrow eyes widened. Despite her seriousness, he nearly laughed. He had never heard Helen curse before. Coming from her, it sounded unnatural.

He cleared his throat. "Baby, ain't nobody in my heart but you," he said in a convincing, steady voice.

"Well, I'll tell you another thing, Buck Carrington, whatever you doing betta cease by the next time you come over here—less you can forget 'bout me."

Before he could attempt to swoon or to convince her out of her stance, a stout woman with mud red skin and a mass of thick black hair braided and pinned in no particular style, stood at the kitchen door. She shook her apron that had been held full of crumbs and flung the tiny

pieces at the mess of hens that clucked noisily about the side porch steps. As she smoothed down the front of her frock, she peered out at Helen with dull eyes. “Come eat,” she said in a short voice, the door slamming hard on her command. Helen’s folks never invited Buck in for dinner, or even a glass of tea. He was eight years older than she. He smoked and drank whiskey.

“No damn good for my baby girl,” her father had said when he first started coming around, taking up long walks with her, taking up too much time with his daughter, who had never before been interested in a suitor. Really, she had never had the chance.

Her father had held a tight rein over his eldest girl. Though she would not be considered pretty, at least not in a dainty sort of way, she had good, wholesome looks and a voluptuous, curvy figure that beckoned the admiring stares and the initiation of friendly conversations from many local boys. A few had even mustered the nerve to visit, but the awkwardness of her father, sitting, listening, and staring had diminished any notions of a relationship developing. When they did not return, he, a burly, tall man, would proudly straighten his back and shift his belt on his waist in satisfaction, saying, “Won’t no good no how” and label them all as lazy, dumb, or weak. He had a particular label for Buck, too—a “no count, good-for-nothing.” Indeed, he had bestowed him with the same icy stares and intense vigilance, yet his intimidation did nothing to deter Buck’s efforts of courtship.

“I ain’t thinking ‘bout your Papa, girl,” he had told her on his third visit. “You’s a woman now—nineteen years old. And it’s time you started being treated like one.” He then stole a daring appraisal of her figure and imagined the flesh beneath the curves under her blouse and around her waist. Helen had blushed and avoided his boldness by looking away at the glow of the oncoming sunset, its rays of mandarin reflecting the fire in her heart. The rush of feelings had confused and consumed her then, and even now.

“Coming, Mama,” she had said, leaping lady-like off the swing. She turned abruptly to Buck and tried to sharpen her soft voice for effect. “Remember what I said.”

He sat a good while there on the ragged swing by himself, circling his right foot in the dirt and watching Helen saunter, eyeing her stout, big-boned frame, her steady, deliberate stride. Though color rushed to her face as she left the burn of his stare, she did not turn back to wave or smile softly at him, like she usually did. Instead, she let the door slam with the same indifference her mother had displayed earlier.

Two days later, Buck had returned to visit Helen with shifty eyes and a toothy grin. He gazed guiltily at her full, crimson lips, and lifted his gaze to her broad nose and finally to her vibrant eyes, two large circles that shimmered the thoughtful splatter of amber brown mixed with a touch of yellow. Their stares lay fixed only in brevity, for in an instant Helen’s turned cold and knowing.

“I think you best leave here.”

“But Helen...” he pleaded to the abrupt slam of the rickety front door.

He didn’t see (or rather talk to) her for three days. Each of those three days, as soon as Junior Stinell rode up the peak of the hill to signal his labor’s end, he began his plight. He headed off, hardly having time to say goodbye to Sammy, trailing the long, dusty road with a hurried gait, flapping his arms up and down like a plucked chicken—a futile attempt to air out his body odor. By dusk, when he was a quarter of a mile from her house, this distance marked by a patch of purple wild flowers at the foot of the field, he dipped off in the bushes behind a big oak, gathered a handful of leaves and wiped the constant flow of sweat that streamed a river, beginning at his hairline and extending to his hairy chest and arms.

The rest of the way he wiped his moist palms along the sides of his britches and nervously repeated his rehearsed rhetoric, which for two days he had yet to utter, for Helen had flatly stifled each one of his attempts. She had answered with the same distant, frosty eyes, looked once at Buck in disdain and disgust, and again slammed the door. The manners that his mother had firmly implanted in him prevented him from banging. With hunched shoulders, his head lowered in gloom, thirsting for a cool drink of water to soothe his parched throat, he sauntered away, treading back down the long, lonesome road.

This utter rejection compelled Buck to resort to the ultimate plea. The following day he returned with a dime-store, gold-plated ring—at least Mister Buford had said it was real gold when Buck scanned the velvet box of sparkling rings and picked the one that he assumed he could afford—the one with no stone at all.

“That there is a fine pick,” Mister Buford had said in a patronizing voice, relieved that he had not had to deflate the poor Negro’s hopes of buying a pricey ring on such a noted occasion. Buck had spent nearly his whole week’s pay on it—nine dollars and seventy five cents. He proudly stuffed the trinket in the folds of his overall pocket.

Whistling this time, Buck was more nervous than ever, yet his nervousness was now mixed with confidence. New feelings had begun to override those of doubt, as he trod down the familiar path in an upbeat stride.

Just as Helen perched her arm to slam the door, he boldly inserted his workbook in the small space in between to block her effort. Without hesitation (or romance) he blurted out his proposal.

“Marry me, Helen.” Silence. Helen’s light brown eyes dammed with tears, yet she kept her full mouth clamped. In an instant, the tears that welled now streamed freely down her rounded brown face, yet she refused to look at Buck directly or to speak.

He continued. “I love you, Helen...I know I ain’t got much now...we’d have to stay at Mama’s for a while...but I’m gon’ take care of you...been on my job for twelve years now...saving to build me a house of my own someday....and about that other woman....I done quit seeing her...I’m gon’ be true to you...honest, Helen, my life don’t mean nothing without you...”

Finally, she averted her gaze to his face and stared at him with a confused, searching expression. Seizing the urgency of the moment, Buck reached inside the doorway and pulled her toward him. A little over an inch shorter than she, he bent her head with strong hands and pressed his lips upon hers, forcing his tongue inside the slight opening. His hands roamed a broad route in front of her blouse and around and across her backside. She pulled away in abruptness, fearing her father would hear, or worse, see her, in this compromising position and scold her in front of Buck.

“Marry me,” Buck repeated, this time as more of a command than a request. His eyes, like Helen’s, filled with emotion and anxiety.

“Yes,” she said in a near whisper, afraid he would see the flutter of her heart through the thinness of her clothing. She folded her arms over her stomach to ease the disarming flicker in it.

He swooped her up in her burly arms and swung her around and around, making swirls and half-swirls of dirt on the dingy porch. He kissed her passionately again and again. This time, she, a virgin, hardly touched, quiet, unnerving, and strong, kissed back, with no regard to what her father would do if he saw.

Betty cried when she saw. Saw this healthy-formed, kinky-haired girl her son had burst through the door with—with stars dancing in his eyes and a smile as broad as the full moon.

“Mama!” he hollered, rushing Helen by the hand to the kitchen.

“Boy, what is all this fuss ‘bout?” Betty was bent over the small table; she was kneading dough and had not looked up from her busy work. Buck cleared his throat. Looking up, his mother smiled and spoke to the stranger and rolled her eyes at her son.

“What you bringing company in here when my house look a mess?” She now stood at the aluminum sink, washing her hands. “And when you think you gon’ introduce me to your friend?”

“Mama, this here is Helen.” He looked over at her and his grin widened. “I done ax for her hand...she gon’ be my wife.”

Wife? Betty’s mouth dropped.

The word “wife” was still floating around Betty’s head, waiting to sink in, as she stood among the small church gathering, her weeping drowning out the vows that Preacher Smith had raised his voice to lead. Joseph and Adell, Helen’s parents, stood opposite her their stern faces visibly annoyed and lacking emotion, at least any positive kind. “Poor black trash trying to be uppity,” Betty had said to camouflage the insult of their disapproval. The reverend politely cleared his throat, in order for Betty to regain her composure. Buck, nattily dressed and groomed in gray pin-stripe, his best (and only) suit, refused to dot the perspiration that sprang up and slowly dripped down his hairline. Helen bit down hard on her lower lip and clung tightly to the bouquet of fresh-picked daisies. Betty’s bosom shook, as she hiccupped, belched and then palmed her mouth to stifle oncoming sobs.

Happy weeping. Her boy had found a suitable wife with good manners, who wasn't lazy—word had it that she did impeccable housework for Miss Anne Sutherland. Plus, she was wide-eyed and unsoiled—fresh for breeding a house full of grandchildren.

Melancholy weeping. For she was compelled to relinquish her roles as sole caretaker and nurturer of her pride and joy and accept the fact that he now loved another woman just as much and maybe even more than the woman who spit life into him, pushed him with tears of agony and joy from her womb, and worried and doted over him for twenty-eight years.

Betty tilted her head, sloping her straw and violet-lined hat at an angle, patted lightly under her cheeks with a white cotton hankie, and meshed down her best linen dress, one that she had craftily sewn from a pair of the Misses' old-throw away curtains. ("Take them," Miss Nettie had said in one of her more generous moods.) She forced a smile. Her son was happy; she could tell by the way his voice trembled as he repeated a tenured "I do" and the way his hand shook as he slide the small ring with a bit of awkward difficulty over her outthrust finger. "A happy time," she repeated aloud, as she watched the two embrace.

The sweet, bright memory of Buck's wedding day dimmed and soured as he sat staring now at his plate. It shined clean, his salient reflection clearly mirrored, not a trace that there had been food on it. If only the slate of his marriage could be wiped just as clean...

And his broken promises could be mended... He had not cheated in malice; actually, he had done it without thought or consideration. It happened two weeks after he had carried Helen over the threshold of the downstairs room Betty had done up with fresh curtains and a new handmade quilt.

Late one Friday evening, after a long and laborious day in the field, Buck and Sammy had made their way over to the local juke, Cooke's, a dingy, run-downed shack covered by a tin

roof. Inside there was a bar, scattered rickety tables and hard back chairs, two pool tables, and a piccolo that effused scratch jazz and sultry blues lyrics. The soulful music created a faint solemnity and sophistication among rural life. The spacious room was filled with laughter, smoke, loneliness, and most of all a deep longing for things Colored people knew existed, but had never felt, seen, tasted, nor touched. Sitting around a lop-sided table, as Buck sipped from a perspiring bottle of beer and smiled at the promise of his newly dealt hand of poker, he glanced up and spotted her, looking sultry and tawny. Lust clouded his eyes (and his judgment) and he did not resist the burning temptation.

“Ain’t that Lady Bug over there?” Sammy had asked, squinting through the haze of smoke generated by the cloudy puffs of his cigar.

“Yeah,” replied Buck, briefly glancing at her and appearing unmoved.

“Wonder what she doing’ here. I ain’t seen her in here before... And who is that extra fine thing with her?” Sammy shook his head and ran his tongue across his lips, as though he had tasted something sweet.

“Don’t know,” answered Buck, arranging and rearranging the cards held in a slightly coveted position.

“Nigga, who you think you fooling? Acting like you don’t want to stare a hole through that slinky dress she wearing!”

Buck’s mouth then widened to a mischievous grin; he could not hide his thoughts from Sammy—they had been best friends since childhood. Buck had known, when Sammy had started washing under his armpits, scraping grit off his teeth and eyeing his sister, Hazel Belle, with big dreamy eyes, that he wanted her. No matter how many times Sammy had denied it, Buck could hear the truth in his voice. Likewise, Sammy could see the truth in Buck’s eyes, as he cocked his

head in Lady Bug's direction and rested his gaze there, relishing the way the flair of her pleated skirt followed the subtle swing of her hips, admiring her prissy air, as she stood talking to a short, curly haired, light-skinned comrade and flinging her hand in exaggerated cajoling. She glanced at Buck discreetly out of the corner of her eye, trying desperately to feign nonchalance. Doing so, she threw her head back in a display of girlish laughter, revealing a set of even, white teeth. Those Airs. Drew Buck like a Magnet.

Before he even realized it, he had folded and quit the game. Smoothing his dark mustache and the pleat of his creased pants, he eased his way over to the piccolo where she and her friend stood, her back to him and flipped her blondish brown locks to the back side of her tanned shoulder.

"Can I play a request from the best-looking gal in here?" His hot breath scorched the back of her neck.

Lady Bug turned curtly to face him. "I didn't know married mens could take request from women other than their wife," she retorted, mocking him, still giggling.

"Married mens takes a lot of stuff from womens other than their wife." He smiled knowingly, absorbing and breaking her resistance.

The irony of it all was that he did not love Lady Bug. She was whiny and superficial and weak. He knew that he could never tolerate her as his wife. Every quality that he had admired about Helen, Lady Bug lacked, yet he kept her as his mistress, showered her with perfume, stockings, and cheap jewelry, and spent his weekly earning every Friday and Saturday night buying her drinks and giving her change to play the piccolo. And every Sunday morning, he would come home with empty pockets and lame excuses.

The sound of Betty shuffling into the kitchen drew Buck from his long, remorseful train of thought. She paused at the doorway, set down the tin pail of suds, and again shook her head. Wiping down the discolored boards, she spoke with a firm voice, never looking at Buck. “I declare, you just ain’t gon’ cease to amaze me, is you, son? Sitting in this kitchen like you ain’t got a care in the world while your wife is in there cryin’ her poor lil eyes out!” She kept focused on her work, scrubbing with a heavy hand.

To escape his mother’s ranting, Buck lagged into the bedroom to face Helen. Daring not to come to close, he trudged in, stopped near the tattered bureau and gazed at her, sitting solemnly on the edge of the bed and peering out the window, its glare casting a light on her that revealed a worn, tired face—the look of a woman beyond a score of living. Already, she had developed faint circles, a shade darker than her complexion, above slightly puffy cheeks. After an awkward silence, she spoke, still staring blankly ahead.

“Buck, if things don’t change ‘round here I’m leaving. My sista wrote me last week and told me ‘bout the good jobs they offering Coloreds up North. She say she can get me on at the fac’try where she at—if I want.”

He stood now with an open stance, frowning and raising his voice to emphasize his point. “Everyone o’ my sistas up North, thinking it was gon’ be a picnic. White man just as hard on Coloreds up there as they is down here. Packed like cockroaches in them rundown buildings. Now, Helen how you think you gon’ leave here in your condition—with a baby on the way?”

“Buck, I ain’t frail. I worked for Miss Anne the whole time I been pregnant and walked five miles in the hot sun to get there. I think I can stand a train ride.”

“I’m your husband, and I can’t let you do that.”

“It ain’t a matter of what you gon’ let me do. You forcing me to do it. You think I wanna sit in this house with’ your Mama day in and day out, waiting for you to quit your messing ‘round and come home and be a husband to me, waiting for you to make good on your promise of us building our own home?”

“Baby, I’m gon’ start putting money away—just give me some time.”

“Time?” she said, raising her voice just a little, so not to let Betty hear. “That lil’ tin jar—what supposed to be the bank for our house—ain’t seen a red cent in weeks. You think I’m a fool? I know where your money be going. We been married nearly a year and I ain’t got nothing to show for it but this big belly and a ton of heartache!”

Buck sighed, walked over to Helen, and sat beside her. He would not insult his wife with another lie or excuse. He nestled his head in her bosom, but she did not wince or show any effect by him. She only stared down at him for a long time, not to threaten him, but to make him aware that she was adamant about her intentions. She did not want, or need, his pity. If a change were to occur, it would be solely his choice. She hoped he would reform—the truth was she loved him desperately—but, just in case he did not, she had packed a suitcase days earlier with garments she would take with her on her brand new start. Teary-eyed, she had shoved it inconspicuously under their bed and simultaneously sent up a silent prayer, begging the Lord to lead her the right way, even if that meant some place far away from her husband.

“Baby,” he whispered, rubbing his head on her comfort and forgiveness, “I’m sorry—don’t leave me.” Still sitting motionless, Helen began to weep. Buck reached for her swollen abdomen and bent to lay his head gently in her lap—for shame and for love.

Chapter Two

It was not the quiet rustle of Buck dressing before daybreak or the soft light that gradually filled the small, sparsely furnished room that awakened Helen, but rather the loud clinking and clanking in the kitchen. She let the annoying sound ring in her ear a moment longer before reluctantly pulling her eyes from sleep's stubborn clench. Having lain in discomfort on her back, she slowly arched it forward and lazily swung her stiff legs one at a time over the edge of the bed. With caution she eased off the hard mattress. Her eyes adjusted to the dimness of the room, its brightness camouflaged by dark curtains at the window. Her feet shuffled clumsily across the hardwood floor to the shabby armoire, where she dressed without concern or adornment. Folding down the stiff gingham collar, she checked it in the mirror and glanced up to the unsightly image of a remotely familiar looking woman, with puffy cheeks, dim eyes, and a disheveled bush of hair. Her hands searched for and quickly found a comb. Blinking away tears, she raked it through three stubborn tangles, and refusing to bear another ounce of discomfort—her pregnancy was enough—tossed the broken-toothed comb aside and waddled into the kitchen.

“Chile, what in the world you think you doing!” Betty hollered over the sizzle of frying sausage and the clatter of pot and pans, as she searched the cupboard for a skillet. “Ain’t that one of your work dresses?”

“Yes’m’, I’m going to do day’s work,” replied Helen, moving gingerly and with strained effort over to the tin pail and resting her palm on her protruding belly. Grabbing one of three cloths beside the pail, she dipped it into the warm water and scrubbed around her face.

“Girl, you done lost your mind? You ain’t got no business walking in the heat and then stretching and bending doing no wash! You trying’ to miscarry, ain’t you, ‘cause that’s sho’ nuff what’s gon’ happen!”

Approaching the small oak table, Helen leaned on it for support. She took in a deep breath, mustering the energy to argue her point. “Miss Betty, I’ll be careful...but I got to work. With Buck spending nearly his whole pay every week, we ain’t been pulling our load. The burden of this house and feeding two grown folks shouldn’t be on you. We got to pull our own weight ‘round here.”

Betty wiped her hands on the front end of her apron and ambled over to pull a chair for Helen. She guided Helen into it by her shoulders and then paced back to the stove.

“The only weight you need to be pulling,” she explained, pausing to drop a spoon of lard in a heated pan and to shake the utensil at her daughter-in-law, “is that a sack you toting ‘round in your belly. Now keep still and eat you a good breakfast. She hesitated. “Do Buck know ‘bout this?” she asked, turning to look down at the pan, her thoughts wallowing in disappointment, thinking her son would allow his wife exposure to such peril.

“No, he don’t know.”

Relieved, Betty let out a short sigh and cracked open three brown eggs in the frying pan. She briskly stirred them, humming as she cooked.

Watching Betty’s fast movements and envying her energy, Helen pushed down on her arms, putting most of her weight onto the end of the table, in an effort to get up. Her back turned,

yet somehow knowing what Helen was doing, Betty motioned with a single, authoritative swing of the hand for her to stay seated. Obediently, Helen complied.

“Girl,” Betty began, “you must don’t know your condition.” She shook her head in her familiar, motherly, “patronizing these young fools” way and continued stirring the eggs.

“Humph... I was simple like you when I was pregnant with the first... till I nearly bled to death, down scrubbing a hateful white woman’s floor! But it won’t be my doing, no sirree! That evil cracker say she needed me to work and if I couldn’t do it, she’d fire me and find somebody else! Well, times was tighter than a tick then---you think we got it bad now—and I couldn’t give up my job, hard as jobs was to come by. But when it come down to it, won’t no job worth me losing my baby for! Lord knows, if I had, no telling what I woulda done—I reckon the guilt alone woulda killed me!”

She then scraped a helping of fluffy scrambled eggs, two sausages, and a slice of spoon bread onto a plate and carried it over to Helen, setting it before her. “Eat every bit of it.”

Gazing down at the plate and inhaling the thin curls from the hot food, the appetizing aroma jarred her senses. The churning and noisy growl of her stomach reminded her that she had not eaten since the day before—breakfast—when Buck had come in. She felt to the side of the plate and realized she did not have a fork but before she could get up, her mother-in-law promptly handed her one and took a seat across from her.

“Yeah, chile...” She was starting up again, trying to dissuade Helen from going to work. “Women got to be real careful. A woman down the way—you don’t know her—‘cause she never step foot from her property—had a miscarriage and the doctor sewed something up wrong and she turned barren.” She chewed, swallowed, and forked more eggs into her mouth before continuing. “Went fool after that, started collecting sticks and rocks, calling them her chirren,

and talking to them and nobody else!” Betty chewed vigorously and stared at Helen with the wide-eyed look of a storyteller, searching for impact; Helen’s expression was one of blankness. Betty was satisfied with that. Often Helen got a blank look when she pondered. Biting down on her lower lip, Helen’s appetite had suddenly lessened, though she had a feeling some of the truth had been stretched for effect.

“Eat, chile!” Betty commanded, seeing food linger on Helen’s plate. “Can’t start the day off on no empty stomach. You needs your nourishing.”

Helen took another small spoonful of the bread and thought about the reality of her situation. The fact remained that money did not fall from trees, and there was not enough of it coming in. So she held quietly, tenaciously, to her decision, and concentrated on eating. Betty, on this rare occasion, had run out of argument, so they finished their breakfast in silence.

The silence lagged until Helen, sensing Betty’s anxiety, attempted to reassure her. She wiped her mouth with her napkin and forced a smile. “I’ll be fine, Miss Betty. Don’t worry,” she said, getting up and stopping to pat her mother-in-law on the shoulder. She scraped her leftovers in a pail for the dog and grabbed a bonnet from the hat rack.

“Chile, you may as well save your breath, telling me not to worry.”

Worrying was her instinct; it came natural to her. Not to anguish over one of her children—and that is what she had grown to regard Helen as—would be as tedious and painful as suppressing an involuntary bodily function. Even worrying freely, she felt the purrs of a bad case of gas erupting. As she got up to clear the table, she let out a loud, startling burp.

“I declare, “ said Betty, coming around from the side of the dingy two-story house where the small red doghouse stood and a droopy-eyed mutt lapped from the pail., “ breakfast musta been mighty good this morning ‘cause ole Flapjack ain’t got but a pinch to eat!” Po’ thing!”

Standing and waiting on the edge of the planked porch, Helen smiled and gazed at the dog. Though she had never asked, she had figured that his name came from the shade of his coat, the color of a perfectly browned hotcake. “Shouldn’t cook so good!” she hollered, stepping slowly down the steps.

Side-by-side the two women journeyed down the rocky hill and onto the dirt road. Betty had found good company in Helen, glad that Buck had married and brought this soft-spoken, brown girl to live in her house, to savor her good food, and to listen to her stories, particularly on mornings like this when she would have had to begin her day trailing the road in solitude. She commenced to hum again, while Helen displayed a look of worry, weighted by Betty’s incessant warnings during breakfast. After a while, Helen spoke.

“What you think would be a good name for the baby?” she asked, trying to focus on something else.

“Well that depend on what you think it is... women generally got a good feeling what they carrying... I knew the way that last devil of mine kicked inside me all day and during the night that finally, after four girls, I was gon’ have me a ole big-headed boy! The way that thing was kicking—seem like he couldn’t wait to come out and rough and tumble!”

Helen smiled, imagining a young Betty pregnant with the strong, fully-grown man she had fallen in love with. “Well, I believe it’s a girl,” she said. “Most times, she’s quiet and peaceful, just like her Mama!”

“Well...” Betty was already huffing and slowing down her pace. She could feel her bunions rubbing against the corners of her shoes. “If you believe it’s a lil’ ole girl, then you got to take a name passed down from either your family or Buck’s. I wish I’d da done that, but back then I was trying to be cutesy and come up with a whole new set of names on my own!”

“I ain’t got to look too far for no name,” she said, smiling, feeling small beads of perspiration drip down her armpits, “if it’s a girl, I’m gon’ name her Betty.”

Betty smiled appreciatively. “That’s mighty sweet of you, sugar, but I don’t need no namesake. If you want a good name from Buck’s side, you might can use the name “Mary” after my grandma on my Mama’s side. She was a slave in Buckingham County, but she was sold right in town, at the corner between Brunner’s store and the bank. That was the auction place in these parts.”

“Sho’ nuff,” replied Helen. Glad she had escaped the confines of slavery, she silently thanked the Lord.

“She was raped by her master and give birth to my mother, named Agnes. When my Mama was no more than a iddy biddy thing, a big black, handsome slave named Jacob was brought there and Mary fell head over heels in love with him. He was crazy ‘bout her, too. Well, that ole master seen the way Mary looked at Jacob and he didn’t like it one bit! Took to whipping ole Jacob for the least lil’ thing, whipped him till his back dripped down streams of blood! Then he’d go and try to sleep with Mary, but she wouldn’t have it. Told him ‘No sir!’ and to leave her alone! Well, that was no kinda way for no wench to talk to no white man, so he taken his big red fist and banged her upside her head and then ripped her dress and took what was his—after all, he owned her and she won’t married.”

“He raped her again?” Helen asked, feeling sorry for this woman, Mary.

“Sho’ did. And when Jacob come by her quarters later that night and seen her lip all bloodied up and her breasts scratched and hanging’ clean out her dress, he tore outta there and run to the big house, straight through the front door, hollering, ‘You white bastard! I’ll kill you!’ He found him sitting in the parlor in a big tall chair, and ask what the matter, Jacob grabbed him

up outta that chair. He musta gone fool—love make folks fool—always have and always will— ‘cause Ole Jacob tried to whip the life outta him, and he probably woulda if he won’t stopped dead in his tracks by a gunshot in the back. A house nigga had heard the ruckus and come in and grabbed a rifle from the cabinet and shot and killed Jacob.”

“What?” Helen exclaimed, her eyes widening. “A colored man killed him?”

“Yeah, chile, some of them house niggas woulda did just about anything for their master’ cause they thought their master had did so much for them, letting them work inside out the heat and hard weather, getting the best table scraps, and getting’ slapped but not whipped. Anyway, Mary heard the gunshot and come running, trailing across that path crying and hollering. When she bust in and seen her love laying there dead and the house nigga standing over him, looking like he had just did a good deed, she grabbed the gun from him and shot him in the chest and then turned it to the white man!”

“I declare, Miss Betty! What happen then?”

“Well, luckily, the Misses come in from behind and grabbed the rifle from her.”

“Did the white woman shoot her?” Helen’s heart sank at the thought of it.

“She was ‘bout to, but the white man told her not to. And since she had killed a nigga and not a white person, they didn’t hang her. Plus, the master figured now that ole nigga was dead, he could have her all to hisself. Even still, he whipped her something terrible—a dead nigga is money wasted, you know—and then he pumped another baby in her and then two more before she was set free in ’65.”

Helen’s mind filled with the image of a beaten, yet brave Mary. Betty kept silent a moment, thinking how bad her joints ached, but daring not to complain.

“Sound like Mary was something else, to stand up for what she believed was right.”

“Sho’ was,” Betty nodded. “That there is what you call a rare breed!”

Both straightened their hunched backs. For the brevity of a moment, they knew and felt Mary, her daring strength, her will to fight back and rebel against the authority of her oppressors. This time the silence that lingered was comfortable and easy.

They continued to trail down the outstretch of dusty road until Betty spotted, just ahead, their usual point of parting—a fork that broke the one road into two—marking a three mile distance to each of their destinations. She took in a deep breath and let out an elongated belch.

“Is you alright, Miss Betty?”

“Yeah, chile, I’ll be fine, but I’d be even better if you’d turn your hardheaded tail ‘round and walk back to the house!”

“Now, Miss Betty...” Helen had begun to argue in a soft voice.

“Never mind,” she said cutting her off, sighing and shaking her head. “I know you stubborn. Just don’t let that white woman put too much pressure on you. I know we ain’t supposed to speak up, but if you start to not feeling good, say so! And stop soon as you feel tired—don’t care how much more work she say you need to finish!”

“Yes’m,” she said, nodding and turning to leave.

Betty stood in the humidity, her own legs already weak, her feet already aching. She gazed at her hands, swollen and bent from arthritis. Even at this early hour, the sun had already begun to bear down on her in the onset of its sweltering heat. Looking up, she squinted her eyes with blurred vision and watched Helen hike. Slow and sluggish. “These youngens is ‘bout as hardheaded as they can be!” she muttered to herself before she turned to trail the rest of the three-miles to begin the plight that awaited her.

Betty's labors were tedious and long. Miss Nettie knew it and felt a purge of guilt to watch Betty struggle to complete such a wide range of menial chores, so she tried to soothe her conscience with subtle gestures of generosity, giving Betty leftover pastries and rolls to take home to her family or piling her up with hand-me-downs. This benefited both, for Miss Betty accepted graciously and was glad to get them, and Miss Nettie was glad to have given this poor, aging Negro woman a token of kindness.

In an unfortunate sense, Helen and Miss Anne too had found a ground of tolerance. The scene in this house played differently—the tranquility of the airy and quiet rooms intermittently broken by Miss Anne's harsh voice, which transcended into a shrieking echo, vibrating in Helen's ear.

“HHHlllenn! I vant you to clean—I vant yo to scrub—I vant you to clean and scrub some more!”

Helen would answer promptly, her apparent willingness fueling Miss Anne to increase her demands, as though waiting for her to finally break from the pressure. She never did. Through extra exertions Helen managed to release her anger physically, rather than verbally. This benefitted both—Helen was able to tolerate this malevolent woman's incessant nagging, and Miss Sutherland raised her brow in satisfaction at the end result—a silent acknowledgement of her meticulous work. Though Helen always returned to the fork around half past six with a forced smile, Betty knew by her sluggish gait and her dismal look how hard Miss Anne must have been on her.

Now, miles apart, the familiar image of Helen's tired, distraught face haunted her. Unable to shake these despairing thoughts, Betty continued to belch and though she tried hard to contain them, to “act civil in the presence of the white folks' house,” it was no use. The noisy echoes her

mouth emitted trailed from the hallway to the sitting room, reaching Miss Nettie, who, offended by such rudeness, held her breath in primness and put the cloth she had been knitting close to her flat chest.

Betty belched as she heartily scrubbed and scoured the squared tiles down the long, beige corridor...belched as she hand washed a tub full of white, cotton sheets...belched and sweated as she hung them on the narrow clothesline out back in the scorching midday sun...belched so loud she didn't even hear Miss Nettie's frail voice calling her in from outside.

"Betty...Betty... I tell you," Miss Nettie said, standing at the back door, her skinny legs looking like two beanstalks, "you sure aren't yourself today. Come on in here out of the heat and drink a cool glass of water and put a little baking soda in it. Maybe that'll help all that gas of yours. I want you to peel and can a few quarts of fresh peaches." Staring out at Betty, her gray eyes narrowed in concern. She thought well of her; Betty had come to her every day, except for holidays and Sundays, in rain, snow, cold and heat for the past fifteen years, since her mother had died and she, an elderly widow, had moved down from Pennsylvania to occupy the house. She considered Betty "good people," a respectful, rare breed of Colored who was reliable and who could be trusted.

"You alright, Betty?"

"Yes, ma'am," she said gathering the basked in one arm and hobbling toward the house. She had upheld one of her self-imposed rules—"The mo' shut mouths 'tween Coloreds and white folks, the better!"

Miss Nettie shook her head. "Your mind seems to be a million miles away today."
"Not a million—only 'bout six-down the road with Helen, fretting over how that chile making out." She thought to herself.

If Betty could have seen down the road, through the haze of torrid heat, and through the walls of the once immaculate, now fair and modestly kept plantation, she probably would have succumbed to a fatal case of indigestion. Still, seeing nothing, she must have had a sixth sense, burping the way she did...

From the moment Helen stepped through the double doors and saw the contempt hardening Miss Anne's grey eyes to a dim shade of pewter and shriveling her face to a pale pink knot, she knew the hardship lay ahead.

"Go around back!" a sharp, high-pitched voice hollered. Helen sauntered around the back door, where she was greeted by Miss Anne's stiff German accent. "Vhat do you tink—coming through the front?"

"Sorry, Miss Ane, but last time I worked, Mister John told me I'd better use the front door or I'd hear about it!"

"Mister John has informed me of no such conversation. You do as I say until I investigate the matter." She stepped aside.

"Yes ma'am," Helen remorsefully replied as she tip-toed past.

"You've got a lot of vork to do today and I vant you to start her in the kitchen, polishing the silver."

Helen gazed sullenly at the large pile of silver that cluttered the long Maplewood table.

"Yes, ma'am," she said softly.

"And don't take too long vit zat because zere's much catching up you need to do."

Helen picked up the container of yellow polish, dabbed the small cloth into it, and began rubbing the dampened rag carefully up and down each piece. She glanced around at the kitchen, admiring the lace pot holders, fancy platinum and silver tea kettle, and the array of hand-crafted

canisters set on an oak buffet. “White folks sho’ do live in the lap o’ luxury,” she thought to herself, imagining and contrasting waking up and waltzing into this spacious kitchen and using its finery to treading over the cold floorboards into the small unadorned kitchen of Miss Betty’s. Through careful and quiet assessment, Miss Anne’s domain did not seem so appealing, and Helen smiled, realizing there was a warmth and coziness where she dwelled that this room, this whole house, had never known. Her smile dropped at the sound of Miss Anne’s voice.

“HHHHeellenn! I vant you to brush my hair!” The noise sounded like it came from the parlor. Helen wobbled down the long corridor, heading toward it. At the doorway, she paused, watching Miss Anne remove the small pins and shake her thin mass of straw-colored locks, letting them fall lifelessly to her bony shoulders. She sat in an embroidered high-backed chair by the fireplace—a plain, pale woman, nearly ugly, surrounded by the beautiful and intricate décor.

“Vell, what are you standing zhere looking dumbfounded for?” Helen quickly gathered her senses and scurried over to Miss Anne. She began nervously brushing her hair. The hard bristles scratched her scalp.

“Ouch!” she hollered and jerked away, turning to face her. Her eyes bore into Helen’s.

“Vhere is your head, girl! Vhat are you tinkin—brushing like my head is a tough as an ass’s hide?”

“Sorry, Miss Anne,” Helen replied, looking down at her shoes.

“Never mind. I’ll do it myself,” she said, grabbing the brush from her. “Go back to polishing the silver and then dust in the parlor!”

With dust rag and furniture polish in hand, Helen looked around wearily at the huge living room, overcrowded with expensive cut vases, colorful china sculptures, and loads of both large and small pieces of antique mahogany furniture. The dark and lifeless room beckoned

light—a light under which Miss Anne would scrutinize each piece with a critical eye in search of the slightest smear or speck of dust—a light that Helen hoped would lift her dismal spirits. Standing by the large picture window, she tied back the thick, velvet drapes, the color of deep forest green—winter curtains that should have been taken down at the onset of spring. But Miss Anne was stubborn. Because it was Helen who had suggested it and brought it to her attention, she had answered with a flat “no.” She answered most requests and suggestions in the same manner—in undeniably rude and utter rejection.

Bending her tired back, Helen swirled the cloth over and around the tops, edges, and legs of furniture, rubbing hard crevices and on visible spits, though not with her usual toil. Feeling a pang in her lower abdomen, she squirmed and arched her back. As she dusted, Miss Anne passed, peeking in at her.

“Girl, do you know it it’s nearly half past one and you haven’t even begun the ironing yet?”

“Yes, Miss Anne, but...”

“No ‘buts’,” she interjected, ignoring the sight of Helen’s swollen hands and feet and the anguish in her eyes. “If this vork isn’t done by your usual time, you still von’t get an extra cent from me. You understand me, girl?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Miss Anne pursed her thin lips and stared condescendingly at Helen. The fact that this young girl had come to work for her when her rigid temperament and demands had chased everyone else away had no bearing on her. Her soul had been cold to Negroes so long; there was no thaw, no change of heart. It should be noted that her malice could be lifted immediately, for this was the same woman who would cry like a baby if an early frost wilted the blooms of her

rose garden or whine like an unnursed calf at the sight of a slain squirrel or deer. This same woman would speak to her scrawny black cat, Lil' Kitty, better than any human being—Colored or white, including her own husband. Helen often wondered how Mister John ever saw past her cruelty and what happened to her to make her act so ugly in the first place. How did she win the heart of such a mild mannered man? For it had always been he, Mister Sutherland, who had demonstrated a modicum of kindness to Helen. She smiled, and though her hand, clutching the rag, still moved, her mind had drifted to their first encounter.

Walking up the wide steps and approaching the shiny, maple door, her mother's words chimed in her head—"Go on out and find you some work—you old enough and sho' big enough!" She knocked softly, hoping no one would hear. She had turned to leave, when, to her dismay, the door creaked open and a manly voice compelled her to lift her eyes from her dusty tie-up shoes.

"Yes?" the modestly handsome stranger had asked, his left brow raised in curiosity and subtle admiration.

"They say y'all needs a maid and I come to apply." Her shoes were a magnet to her eyes.

"Well, we sure do," he responded. "Come on in." He stepped aside, extended his arm, and waved her a grand welcome. She noticed his broad smile and friendly eyes, and her pounding heart slowed its pace. As she entered, she wiped her sweaty palms along the pleats of her skirt.

"Wait right in here," he said, directing her into the parlor. Sitting stiffly, she eyed the intricate paintings, plush, velvet sofas and matching drapes. Upon closer scrutiny, she noted the debris that had formed a thin layer on all furniture and glassware. The abrupt entrance of a tall, too thin, middle-aged woman startled her. She had nearly lost her balance in the chair.

“Yes?” the thin woman asked, still standing and looking as though she had been offended by the liberty of this stranger having taken a seat.

“I come for the job of housekeeper.”

“Experience?” She peered at her from the ridges of her bifocals.

“Well, none.” Helen twisted her hands folded in her lap. “This... this would be my first job,” she stammered.

Miss Anne turned her nose and then her feet to leave. “Tank you. Zat vill be all.”

“But...” Helen couldn’t figure out why she was protesting, except to alleviate the disappointment of defeat. Either that or the thin switch that would await her if she came home again, this third day out looking, jobless.

She turned to the soft-spoken girl. “Zat vill be all,” she repeated.

Helen gathered her purse to leave. Loud whispers near the doorway kept her seated...

“My Lord, Anne, give her a chance.”

“No, she has notting. No experience and plus, she’s a child.”

“Well, you see how well you do with full grown folks—two gone in two months.”

“But...”

“But nothing,” he said, cutting her off with the same abruptness that she had exhibited to Helen. Miss Anne, her face red as a wild strawberry and her dull grey eyes turned sky blue, reentered and she cleared her throat. “Tomorrow, seven a.m. sharp. Now, zat will be all.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Helen smiled—and dropped it quickly and clumsily when met with apparent enmity. Miss Anne stared coldly at her a moment before leaving the room. Luckily, Miss Anne’s wave of malice had been slighted promptly by Mr. John, who was glad to have a bright young face lighten up the gloom that Miss Anne spread. He had smiled at her on

her way out and said, “Glad to have you.” And for the next five years, it would be he who would make the unbearable slightly tolerable by intervening with a stern word, or by directing Miss Anne’s attentions elsewhere, secretly winking his eye at Helen, and standing behind his wife, leading her out of the room.

She had been grateful to Mister John for that and had even overlooked his long stares at her breasts and buttocks, as he lustfully eyed her body from behind the edge of an outstretched newspaper or an open book. But he had never so much as laid a hand on her, though in his mind he had done so a thousand times folded.

The bird on the grandfather cuckoo had struck twice before Helen got to the laundry. Nobody had been hired to come in the two weeks of her absence, and the basket was piled to the hilt. She stood over the wood pressing board, picked up a crinkled shirt, and stretched the sleeve over the top edge of it. She began the monotonous cycle of moving the flatiron over material, repositioning the material, moving the flatiron over a newly positioned, crinkly piece. This continued until the third cluck sounded down the hall. A film of sweat stuck Helen’s dress to the skin on her back—“Child, don’t let that white woman push you too hard!”—Her hand moved slower and slower over garments and tablecloths, sheets, and pillowcases. Her eyes fluttered and closed and in an instant the flatiron turned white cloth to brown. Not the smell of burning, but a subtle kick, as though knowing its mother had lost concentration, awakened and alerted her. She quickly grabbed the garment, muttered a hushed, “Lord hammercy.” Hastily, she put it at the bottom of the pile and told herself that she would deal with the consequences of telling Miss Anne and enduring her fury later. Grabbing another stiff shirt, she began moving the heavy iron over it with her right hand, and with her left, she rested it where she had felt the unsettling flutter.

Ignoring the light-headedness that sought to defeat her, her mind resisted and sought to focus on something more important, on her stomach, on the life forming within it. Flooded with uncertainty, she shifted from her left to her right side. Nervous, too, she lifted her hand to chew at her fingernail. Since Buck, these strange feelings had become familiar to her.

It was the same feelings she had when, beneath the thin, white sheets on the narrow, squeaky bed, Buck had tugged at her nightgown and then her undergarments and crawled on top of her, fumbling and thrusting.

“Stop, Buck,” she had pleaded. “Please.”

“SShh.” He fondled her full breasts and bent his head to them. The pain below too intense, she had closed her eyes and concentrated on the pleasure above, running her fingers through his thick, wavy hair. Feeling the tear, the sharp pain, she began to whimper.

“Stop,” she demanded. But Buck had been persistent. The faster the thrusting became, the less concern he paid to her discomfort. Only when he shuddered did he peer down at her and smile—the gentleness in his eyes slowly returning. He then kissed away her tears until there were none left; they lay naked and sweating, cooling under a delicate breeze from the window. Helen smiled in the darkness, feeling content and womanly, snuggled under Buck’s arm. Perhaps, child-rearing would be the same—pain and then pleasure. This was the last thought Helen remembered before her eyes fluttered again, a weight stifled and then lifted use of her limbs, and she succumbed to a suffocating blanket of white and then darkness.

A gentle voice called to her. “Helen...Helen... can you hear me?”

Her senses returned from a light breeze that fanned her face and neck. Not surprisingly, it was Mister Sutherland’s face to which Helen awoke. He kneeled over her, her head held gently

in his outstretched palm. She felt a rush of dampness emerge on her forehead; fatigue compelled her to close her eyes again. Voices floated around her, familiar voices...

“John Sutherland, are you out of your mind? Vhat will people tink-vhat will they say—seeing you hauling a pregnant nigra voman trough town?”

“Now, Anne, you’re simply being irrational. Poor Helen is sick—look at her. She needs to be in a doctor’s care. Would you rather have the doctor come here and treat her?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

“Her mother-in-law is just down the road a bit at the Reynolds farm. I can swing by there for her... Seriously, Anne, you’re making too much of this and I won’t hear another word about it! Fetch lil’ Isaac.”

Realizing there was no point in arguing with him—his mind was fixed—Miss Anne sighed, narrowed her eyes, and turned reluctantly, yet obediently.

Soon after, a lanky young Colored boy, wide-eyed and curious, appeared at the doorway.

“Yessah, Mista John?”

Still holding her head upright, he turned to direct the boy. “Run and fetch the horse from the barn—the brown mare—and tell Jim to hitch the carriage.

“Yessah,” he said. Seeing Helen sprawled out and the urgency in Mister John’s eyes and hearing it in his voice, he rushed out to the field to convey the message to his father.

Meanwhile, Mister John tried to comfort Helen, who lay disoriented and fearful, tears and sweat wetting her round face.

“Wha..what happen?” she asked in a hoarse voice. “My baby...”

“SShh,” he said, patting her lips softly with his finger. Don’t try to talk. You’ll be just fine, Helen. Don’t panic and lie still. Someone’s coming to fetch you up.” He set her head down carefully and left her lying alone.

The frown lines arched Mister John’s narrow forehead, as he waited impatiently on the front porch. Hand buried in his pockets he began pacing and cursing under his breath. He let out a hearty breath when he heard and then saw the wagon, steered by Jim, coming around the bend. The brawny Negro jumped off and ran to the porch, stopping in front of the steps. Panting, he waited for his next command.

“Come on in, Jim!” Mister John said, flinging his arms to hurry him. “Bring Helen out. She’s in the parlor. Jim rushed in through the main entrance. Careful with her, you hear?” he called after him.

“Yessah!” Jim hollered without looking back.

Jim returned speedily, holding Helen’s stout frame with obvious ease. Her limp legs dangled as he treaded in long strides to the back of the carriage. He stared down at her. “Take care, Miss Helen. God gon’ look after you!” he said, placing her gently inside, cushioning her by spreading a crumpled blanket over the hard seat, and repositioning her head for comfort. Leaping off, he hollered around to Mister John. “Okay! She in! All set!”

Mister John shook the reins and hollered “Hie!” to the horse, urging the carriage forward. In a loud clamor, the horse whinnied and galloped on, sending a cloud of foggy smoke behind, creating distance from the mansion, until soon the wagon was no more than a shrinking dot on the narrow road.

Chapter Three

Betty was wiping down the windows in the parlor when she spotted a horse and buggy fleeing up the roadway towards the mansion. In a fretful fit of nervousness, she touched her chest and let out a great, long belch. “Lord in heaven!” she muttered, rambling as quickly as she could onto the long cement porch. She placed one hand on a thick white post and the other on her mounded hip and squinted out at the figure, fast approaching. As it drew nearer, she recognized the form of Mister John’s narrow face and hobbled back inside. “Miss Nettie!” she shouted, gathering up her pocketbook from underneath the coat rack in the foyer, “I’m gone!” Hearing the ruckus, the elderly woman ambled down the corridor, just in time to behold Betty scurrying down the porch and stepping into the back of a carriage, where a thin, distraught looking white fellow helped her on. “What in the world?” she mouthed and stood in a stupor of confusion—her waves overlooked and her frail “goodbye” unheard as the carriage sped away again with the same urgency.

“Lord, chile,” Betty said, sitting as close to Helen as she could. She grabbed a handkerchief from her purse and lightly pressed the beads of sweat on Helen’s forehead and neck and then on her own. Helen’s eyes spilled thick tears that dripped onto the blanket beneath her and choked her weak words.

“Miss Betty—I’m so—scared—Lord, I’m—so scared.”

“There, there, chile, ain’t nothing to be scared of.” In a calm voice, she had concealed her own panic.

“Miss Betty, listen to me...” Helen paused and tried to reach beyond weariness. “I felt...a...gush...”

Before she could finish, Betty hastily lifted Helen’s dress—drenched—and peered at the small puddle below. It was tinted with blood.

“Lord hammercy, your water done broke.”

“OOOOOhhh,” Helen whined.

“Hush now. Ain’t no time to lose your head.”

Her face moist from tears and perspiration, Helen flinched from a sharp pain that struck her abdomen.

“Hold on,” said Betty, still holding her hand. “We be home soon.”

“UUUhhh!” she wailed. The wrench of agony bore her nails into the skin of Betty’s palm.

“Lord, is we there yet?” she muttered to herself.

“UUUhhh!”

Betty closed her eyes and prayed over Helen’s cries. “Lord in heaven, we ask you humble, we beg you, look after this here pitiful chile. She need you, dear Lord, to bring my precious lil’ grandchile safe into this world...in your name sake, we pray...”

“Miss Betty...I feel like something splitting me open!”

As Betty bent again to peer beneath her dress, the carriage screeched to an abrupt halt, jilting her forward to a near-fall. “Thank you, Jesus,” she said aloud. “Thank you, Jesus,” she said again as she held on to Mister John’s hand to aid her off the carriage.

With thin arms, he then lifted Helen and made his way to the tattered house, through the ragged door, carrying the screaming Negro woman to safety.

“In here,” Betty directed, breathing heavily and limping down the hall to Buck and Helen’s bedroom. “Lay her down here,” she commanded, pulling down the covers and fluffing the flat pillow to a mound. He laid Helen, limp and listless, while Betty untied her shoes and spread her legs apart. Just then Helen’s eyes fluttered and her body released itself in a shudder of convulsions. She cried out again.

Mister John’s eyes widened as he stood alongside the narrow bed, his stare fixated. He twisted his palms nervously. “What’s the matter with her?” he asked, dumbfounded.

“The chile having a baby, that’s what!” Betty bent to tear Helen’s frock—exposing her torso. Absorbing the view, Mister John’s eyes widened an oval bigger. He swallowed hard.

“Well,” Betty said boldly, her eyes half-cocked at Mister John, her hands on her hips, “ain’t no sense in you standing there looking foolish—like you ain’t never seen a woman’s private parts before—run ‘round back to the well and fetch a bucket of water!” Mister John rushed out. Meanwhile, Betty spread a thin white sheet over Helen’s waist and moved hurriedly about the room, gathering towels from the armoire.

“Easy now, sugar,” she coaxed, periodically coming over to Helen to pat her forehead with a soft cloth. “You gon’ get through this.”

Licking her parched lips, Helen remained silent, though her eyes, following her mother-in-law’s movements, screamed of her misery.

Mister John rushed in, holding the large tin bucket, its contents sloshing over the sides. Betty pointed to a wood chest at the foot of the bed. Impending peril and fear consumed her thoughts so that she forgot the significant of race and spoke to Mister John like hired help. “Set it

down there.” She then grabbed a towel, dipped it in the bucket and wiped down her hands. She held it out to Mister John to do the same. “Wipe good and look in the kitchen for a pot and start boiling some water—can’t take no chances with germs.”

With rolled sleeves and bodies sweating as profusely as Helen’s, Betty shuffled about; Mister John followed orders. Helen lay with her gown lifted up to her breasts and tossed her head in a frenzy. She puffed her cheeks, letting out panted breaths and then when it seemed she would die of suffocation, she opened her dry mouth to inhale a fresh air supply. As she peered up at the ceiling, she watched it twist rapidly in a nauseating, circular motion. She closed her eyes tightly, but continued to sink in the swirling pool of darkness.

“Push!” Betty commanded. She was bent down at the far end of the bed.

“I-I can’t,” Helen muttered helplessly.

“You can!” coached Mister John, patting Helen’s hand.

“You gotta!” hollered Betty. He stuck and if you don’t hurry up and push, you gon’ cut off his breathing!”

With her eyes clamped shut, she attempted to rise, but fell back, defeated and peaked. Mister John squeezed Helen’s hand tightly, while Betty crouched between her legs and whispered with forceful tenderness, “Chile, you gotta do it. One more push and it be all over with.”

But one more push turned into another, and another, and hours passed. Helen began to pray and weep in broken sobs. Extending one final effort, an effort in the spirit of mother Mary, who, lying on a mass of hay, bore Christ in a meager manger, she attempted once again to lift herself up. A strength that was not her own, combined with a tenacious will, moved her back in slow motion off the hard mattress. She wrenched the corners of the sheet and twisted them to

contour the shape of her fisted hands. “UUUUUUhhhhh!” she wailed, screaming and pushing, simultaneously with all her might. Knifing pain shot through Helen, cutting her, numbing her until the head of a baby, whose mass of coal black hair was wet with mucous and gore, emerged fully from her opening. Mister John, witnessing a birth, felt his eyes had fallen out of their sockets.

“You done it—a baby girl!” Betty shouted proudly, pulling and lifting the child, and then cutting the cord.

Mister John wet a cloth and sauntered around the bed to Betty. He wiped clean the face, arms, legs, and naked black bottom of the screaming infant. Betty laid the brand new miracle down, gently wrapped it in a small blanket, and placed it beside Helen.

The new mother, fatigued and numb, mustered up the strength to reach out for her mother-in-law’s hand and turn to face her. “We gon’ call her Mary—Mary Agnes,” she whispered.

Betty smiled. She wiped Helen’s forehead with a cool, damp cloth until the soothing motion lulled her to sleep, the remnants of a faint smile shaping her lips.

“Well,” Mister John said, “guess I’d better get going before Miss Sutherland skins my hide!”

“Humph... I guess you better.” Betty raised her brow. “And when you gets there, I know you gon’ have plenty to say to try to keep the missus from ringing your neck!”

The storm had subsided and the rainbow had formed in brilliance, and Miss Betty knew that the reality of where Mister John was and what he had helped do had hit him like a brick; like a busy ant, he unrolled his sleeves, patted his tousled hair into place, and high-tailed out of the shabby house, back onto his horse and buggy, back to Miss Anne.

Miss Betty smiled and shook her head. “Don’t care what folks say about mens ruling the world,” she declared to herself, “they’d sho’ nuff be lost if they didn’t have no wife to answer to!”

Betty was fixing Buck’s plate when she heard his heavy footsteps plodding up the planked porch. Dropping a hot roll she had begun buttering, she rushed to the door.

“Son, you got a fine baby girl!” she exclaimed. “A fine one! But, Lord...”

“Hey, hey!” he shouted, interrupting her and swooping off his cap. A broad smile stretched his nose wide across his face. Before Betty could reveal to him the details of Helen’s turbulent labor, he had rushed into the house, sweeping past her, and headed straight for the small room where Helen lay. Holding his cap, he used the back of his large dark hand to wipe the sweat from his forehead. Standing there in the doorway, he beamed with pride at the sight of his wife and newborn, slumbering side-by-side. He sauntered quietly over to the window and gazed out at the promise of blushing sunset perched behind the hills.

Chapter Four

Buck woke to the lulling sound of Mary Agnes, suckling on her mother's nipple. He had awoken several times during the night to a series of resonant wails, but Helen had shushed the baby quickly, and he was able to drift back to sleep fairly easily. "Betta get used to it," she had warned, and he had adapted with little fuss. He yawned, shuffled his legs beneath the covers, and propped his head in his palm, which allowed him an intimate view of the small mouth nursing the dark nipple, her little eyes closed, her little hands and feet fluttering and then still. He looked up at Helen, who was leaning against the iron bedpost and smiling down at the plump round face.

"Mornin', ole sleepy head," she said, still beaming down at Mary Agnes.

"Mornin', yo' self," he said, stretching this time with the intent to get up.

"Yo' Mama said she done axed the reverend to christen lil Mary this Sunday."

"Already? She ain't but two weeks old." He was sitting straight up now.

"Miss Betty say," she recited sweetly, "it's never too soon for God's blessing... she say this here purdy lil black baby ain't nothing but a blessing...coming into the world like a lil' lamb!"

"She say all that," Buck said, yawning, pride feigned as nonchalance. He made his way over the chair piled high with overalls, all the while keeping a steady gaze on Mary Agnes and Helen. "You sho' is a pretty brown girl, you know that?" he declared in a syrupy voice.

Helen smiled, color flushing her face. “Now, Buck Carrington, cut your sweet-talking.” She turned her nose up in exaggerated indifference. “Besides, it don’t do a thing for me no more. I ain’t a simple little girl no more, you know. “

“You was never simple, but one thing’s true—you ain’t a lil’ girl no more—you’s a woman now.” He then grabbed a pair of denim pants and stepped into them, one leg and then the other. Absorbing the weight of his comment, he grabbed his breeches by the belt and pulled them higher over his waist, a macho, manly sort of gesture, knowing that he and he alone, embellishing heartache and joy, had been responsible for the transformation. “Plus, “ he added curtly, buttoning his gingham shirt, “I won’t talking to you no how. I was talking to my lil’ princess over there. If I was talking to you, I’d da said, ‘You sho’ done got fat... titties hanging to yo’ stomach, stomach hanging to your crotch and backside as wide as them hills out there!’”

“Why, Buck Carrington, you ole snake, you!” She had moved to hit him, to inflict a half-loving, half-furious slap. But when she moved, she had inadvertently jerked the nipple out of Mary’s puckered mouth; the wails began. “Hush now,” she said, rocking her. Mischief parted her full lips into a smile. “Buck, come show this gal that ugly black face of yourn. I bet then she’ll hush this fuss up.”

He did and the cries transformed into coos, as though the tiny dark eyes had absorbed the sight of familiarity.

“Hey snucka,” he said in baby talk language and then pulled a beige gingham shirt over his head.

“See,” Helen noted coyly, “She don’t need no nipple. She done got so scared, she done forget she was hungry.” Smiling, she nudged her breast to Mary’s mouth and resumed feeding.

“Watch it now,” he joked, pausing at the doorway. “Don’t feed her too much. Already two greedy womens eat like hogs in here. Don’t breed me no piglet!”

Holding Mary tightly to her chest, she bent to pick up her house shoe to fling at Buck, but by that time, he had made his way into the kitchen where Betty was busy fixing breakfast. She was standing over the stove. Buck eased beside her.

“What you fix?”

“Boy, can’t you open your mouth to say ‘good morning’ for you axin’ me ‘bout some food?”

“Mornin’. What you fix?”

“You got eyes in that hard head o’ yours, ain’t you? Anyway, you gon’ eat it, whatever it is!”

“Hurry up, Mama,” he said, taking a seat and watching her with impatient eyes. “I told Mista Stinell that I’d be to work for him today.”

“Say what?” she asked bending to check the biscuits heating inside the woodstove. “On a Saturday? Since when you work Saturdays?”

“Since that wife of mine take it ‘pon herself to work so hard, she near kill herself and my baby!”

Betty was proud, proud that he had taken the initiative to be a provider, proud that for the past two weeks, he had been home with Helen, not gallivanting with Sammy Nash. But she kept her pride suppressed and voiced her concern-filled rebuttal. “Ain’t no need in you killing yourself over a few pennies,” she declared, piling his plate high. “We making it fine, ‘round here and we gon’ keep making it, extra money or not!” She set his plate filled with two helpings of

everything before him. “Eat every bit of it,” she commanded. “you needs your nourishing out slaving in that hot sun. Gon’ be a hot one today. The sun already out this early!”

Buck ate quickly, easily cleaning his plate, as his mother had demanded, gorging down the last bit of food without pausing for digestion. Sucking his teeth and picking a stubborn spot with his forefinger, he belched, patted his stomach in gratification, and rose from the table. He handed his plate to Betty, who sat nearby shelling a bushel of fresh green peas, and peered down into the barrel, already half-empty.

“Is them from your garden?”

“Well, where you think they come from?” she asked, getting up to wash his plate.

“Mama, I don’t see much as you do ‘round here, you find time to tend to a garden.”

She looked him over—meat poking out in all the right places. “Gotta keep that behind of yours healthy and plump.”

“Now, Mama, go on. I ain’t seven years old no more!”

“Well, since you done gone and got grown on me, now I got somebody else to feed. I gotta make sho’ lil’ Mary Agnes keep plenty of meat on them bones!”

Buck eyed her hips and thighs, spilling out in abundant mounds on each side of her waist. “Not too much meat—hear, Mama?” he teased heading out the side door.

“All the whippings you got ain’t do a thing to tame that fresh mouth of yours!” she hollered after him.

Sitting out on the porch and waiting for the sight or sound of Sammy’s wagon, Buck dug into his pocket, retrieved a pittance of tobacco and sifted it with thick fingers. He lined it sparingly inside a folded piece of cigarette paper. He lit, smoked, and waited.

Hearing the scuffling of hoofs and squeaky iron hinges, he gathered the small brown bag Betty had stuffed with sandwiches and threw the butt of his cigarette onto the ground in front of him. He rose, tucked in his shirt, squashed the smoking butt, and trotted to the wagon. Hopping on, he spat onto the ground.

“You late, ain’t you?”

Sammy flashed a wide smile, exposing a row of chalky-white, modestly crooked front teeth. His dark eyes glowed coal black. “Had a hard time raising up from ‘tween them thighs this morning’.” He turned the horse, guiding him with the reins. “Yeah,” he continued a dreamy-look creeping onto his face. Their bodies swayed from side to side as the horse made an awkward path down the bumpy hill. “Lady Bug sho’ did me a favor when she hook me up with her friend, Minnie.” HE shook his head. “Umph, umph, umph. I swear, if it wouldn’t make you jealous. I’d sho’ kiss her for it!”

Buck looked unconcerned. “You can do what you want...she a single woman. She don’t b’long to me.”

“Yeah,” Sammy continued, pulling his weather-beaten, wide brimmed hat farther down his head, “that thing sure is a treat. Not only is she high yella and purdy, she got her head screwed on tight. Say she gon’ be a nurse—one o’ them ones deliver babies.”

“Damn, man,” Buck replied, fingering his packet of tobacco and inserting a wad in his mouth, “all you been talking ‘bout for weeks is Minnie, Minnie, Minnie. You sho’ is whipped! Guess you done forgot about my sister.”

Sammy smiled, shrugging his shoulders. “Okay,” he admitted, “so I’m whipped. But the four of us—me, you, Minnie and Lady Bug—we done had some good times. I seen you in action. Don’t ack like you ain’t never been hot over no ass!” He paused and his bright smile

dropped. “I ain’t gon’ never forget about Hazel Belle. But I ain’t gon’ sit around crying ‘bout her like no sissy. Besides, you acting like you ain’t never got a piece before. I done found the piece that make me a man.”

“Woman don’t make a man a man.”

“Shit.” Sammy kept his eyes on the road; he often squinted when he thought his words were meaningful. “You stupid if you think that. Ain’t nothing in this world make a Colored man a man but a good woman.”

Buck shook his head in disagreement. “There’s things in this world that a Colored woman can’t do a thing ‘bout and till them things change, ain’t nothing gon’ make us men—walking with our back straight and running shit, not just inside our house, but outside, where it counts, like white men do.”

Knowing that Buck had spoken the truth, Sammy reversed the subject. “So you done give up seeing Lady Bug?”

“I ain’t seen her so I reckon that mean I done give it up.”

He glanced sideways at Buck. “You miss her?”

“Nigga, you sho’ is full of questions this mornin’. Been yacking like a damn hen! Just hurry that horse up so we can get there and get back before dusk!” They traveled the rest of the way in silence.

Soon they were approaching the white fences, long rows neatly aligned to the main road, stretching five miles in both directions from the main house. The boards always impeccably white, for each season Mister Stinell had ordered they be re-painted. Buck remembered, not long before his father had died, helping him paint.

Whenever Buck and his father spent time along, he found this a prime opportunity to ask a few of the questions that weighed most heavily in his thoughts. Stooped beneath his father, so close that if his sweat dropped, it would fall on his shoulder, so close that when they were comforted by a thin breeze, the air trailed the musty odor of his father's underarms under his nose, stinging his nostrils, he felt was as good a time as any.

Keeping his eye on his work, his tongue hanging to the side of his mouth in fixed concentration, he spoke. "Papa, how come white folks live in great big houses and we live in shacks? How come we always for them and non o' them ever work for Coloreds? How come..."

"Boy, you ask too many questions." His father had cut him off with the same old reply.

"But, Papa..."

"Now, shush 'bout it. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir," he said disappointed, his gaze falling from the fence to the ground.

Buck said no more, but watched his father sigh and pause a moment to wipe his sweaty face with his forearm and then he continued to paint, resting his eyes on the monotonous sway of his hand.

"I ain't got no real answer for you, son. Guess that's just the way some things go in this here world—jess like in the Bible—like the Jews—some of us is what you call persecuted and some of us ain't."

"What do 'persecuted' mean?"

"It means some gets whipped and some holds the whip."

Buck studied his father. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man with solemn dark eyes and rugged hands. "Is you ever been whipped before, Papa?"

“Not with no strap,” he admitted candidly, “but, yeah, I guess you could say I been whipped. I reckon life done whipped me.”

“Well, ain’t nobody on’ whip me... you might can... but not life and not never no white man.”

Fleming offered no response, and for the first time, Buck saw him through the world’s eyes. He was not the strong figure who headed his house, fetched wood, made fires and all the important decisions. He was a quiet, beaten man, a man who had crouched under a hail of “yessahs.”

Fleming looked down at his son who, in his deep thought, held the brush frozen in position. “Speaking of whippings, boy, you sho’ gon’ get one if you don’t get to brushing! I’m trying to get outta here by nightfall.”

“Yessah,” he said, resuming the steady flow of his right hand back and forth along the wood. Right then he vowed to himself that as a grown man he would never whitewash a row of fence, unless it was on his own property.

“WWooooee,” Sammy said, halting the horse and stepping to the ground. “You know,” he reminded Buck, “Junior say he want us to whitewash the fence today.”

The irony angered Buck and left a bitter taste in his mouth—he spat it onto the ground before he too hopped off the hard wood seat. “Man, you know how hot it’s gon’ be today?” And he want us out there doing that shit?”

“You want the extra money, don’t you?”

Even as boys, Sammy had been the voice of reason, the source of rationale that either slapped Buck in face with a reality check or set his feet on the ground. He watched his friend hitch the horse to the post and turned to listen to the sound of hoofs, signaling Junior’s approach.

Buck felt the sour taste filing his mouth again, as he thought of Junior Stinell, the eldest son of “Old Man” Richard Stinell, who had taken on the responsibility as overseer, replacing the firm but tolerable dominion of his father with a hard-nosed, scoffing tyranny. He carried a long, leather horsewhip, and though he never struck with it, he thrashed it about menacingly as he administered orders and demands or made belittling, condescending comments. “That cracker can say what he want, but if he ever touch me with that whip, it’s gon’ be hell to pay and I’m gon’ collect!” Buck had told Sammy countless times, as his pride, swallowed with reluctance, scratched the sides of his throat as it went down. Junior’s hatred through the transparency of his fair skin an azure eyes. Both Sammy and Buck, having absorbed it, had grown to hate him as did all the Colored who worked the land for the Stinells’.

“You boys is late,” he said staring down at both men from the height of his horse. “Now, I think I done you two a big favor, letting you get in some extra time on a Saturday. I got a lot better things to do with my time than check up on two slouches.” Indignant, Buck inched forward a little, ready to spew a rebuttal. Sammy nudged him discreetly with the butt of his elbow.

“Now, Junior, “Sammy began, “ain’t no need in you worrying yourself checking on us. When me and Buck takes a job, we does it right.” He cleared his throat and looked down at his shoes. “If you don’t believe us,” he added, “ask your Daddy.”

“Look, I don’t need to smart-aleck reply outta you.” He held the whip alongside the right of his cinnamon-brown mare and sloshed a wad of wet tobacco from his left to his right jaw. “It was a whole lot better when you people knew to keep your mouths shut. Still,” he paused, looking around at the spacious fields, “it’s a whole lot of virgin oaks ‘round here.” He laughed and pulled the reins, turning his horse in the direction of the big house. “Get the brushes and a

fresh can of paint out the woodshed, and, remember, I'll be watching you." He eyed Buck a moment, nudged the horse on with the side of his boot and rode off.

"Damn cracker!" Buck huffed, shoving his fists deep in his overall pockets. His right temple had begun to pulse and he spoke now through clenched teeth. "I swear, one day I'm gon' give that cracker what he deserve!" They made their way across the wide-acred green pasture, ignoring the burrs that stuck to their pants and crickets that sprang off their feet.

"Ain't no need in you talking fool," Sammy advised. His long legs allowed him an easy stride that Buck secretly struggled to keep up with. Sammy took off his hat and ran his fingers down his wavy hair, now knotted from the heat. "These crackers gon' get what they deserve. The good Lord gon' take care of it—by and by."

They had passed the hog pens and chicken coops and were only yards away from the small woodshed.

"Nigga, how long by and by gon' take?" Buck looked over at Sammy's hunched shoulders and bent head. "I ain't got time to be waiting for no rapture!" Sammy shook his head and pulled open the hinge to the creaking door. He jumped back and ducked to dodge several stray wasps that had flown into the brightness. "Man, even we was youngens, you was always the hot-headed one." He stepped inside the small dark shack and handed Buck a can of paint and a small brown brush.

For the remainder of the day and into the evening, Buck carried out the monotonous task of applying paint to brush and brush and paint to fence. When he finished his back was sore. He moaned throughout the night in his sleep and throughout the morning to Helen as they prepared for the big event.

“That ointment you rubbed on me last night ain’t do a bit o’ good,” Buck complained, as he stopped Sammy’s horse in front of the faded church and leaped off the wagon. He placed his right hand on his left shoulder and rotated it in a slow, circular motion before reaching it out to Helen. She was holding Mary Agnes, dressed in pink and lace, close to her bosom. Gingerly, she stepped off. Betty had inched forward on the other side. Buck noticed this and quickly strutted around.

“I got it,” she said, clinging to her pocketbook and to her autonomy.

“Mama, you ain’t got nothing,” replied Buck, inching closer to grab her hand. “We here for a christ’nin’—not no funeral. You tryin’ to fall outta here and break your neck?”

“Well, she said, half-heartedly, tightening her grasp on his calloused hand as she stepped, “least if it’s gon’ be my funeral, I got my best dress on!” Standing beside the wagon, she sized up the crowd. “Look like a good turn-out,” she noted, pressing down the wrinkles on the front of her linen dress.

“Sho’ do,” Helen remarked, gently rocking the baby in her arms, nodding “good morning” to fellow members that passed and graciously accepting praises and fond comments about Mary Agnes.

Meanwhile, Buck was busy slicking down his thick mustache and patting the top of his greased-down head. He then looked down at his shiny black shoes, inspecting them for dirt. Though Betty spoke and shook hands with those who greeted her, she kept a steady eye on her son. She nudged Helen. “Look at him—that black rascal sho’ think he cute, always did—but sharp, ain’t he, girl?” Helen nodded. Betty continued. “I declare, the older he get, the more he the spitting image of his Papa.” She beamed, proudly shaking her head and smiling at Buck. “Boy,

you vainer than any woman out here. Stop all that primping and take your wife by the arm. We needs to get a good seat.”

Buck straightened his back and inserted his arm in his wife’s. His head high, hers bent, still watching the baby, they sauntered at a slow pace up the wood steps and through the faded double doors. Upon entering, he looked beyond the congregation to the ash-colored walls, discolored windows, and the tarnished gold cross at the pulpit; he thought the fluorescence that had lit this entire grey room that hot August afternoon that he and Helen exchanged vows. Now it had returned to its dullness.

Betty, who was trailing behind, had stretched her neck from behind Helen to search for an empty space “Go on up front—to the right,” she whispered over to Buck. She had not caught the side view of Joseph and Adell, seated where she had pointed. Buck frowned.

“Ain’t that yo’ folks?” he whispered to Helen.

She squinted ahead. “Yeah,” she said, almost apologetically. “I sent word to them ‘bout the christ’nin. They ain’t seen her but once since she born.”

They approached the bench and Buck stepped aside to let his mother in first. Betty nodded “how-do’s” to the row of folk and forced a smile at Joseph and Adell as she inched her plump frame past turned knees and struggled to nestle herself to allow room for Helen and Buck. With maternal vigilance—pursed lips and frigid posture—she watched, as Buck nodded to a set of icy eyes and upturned noses and trudged past, his hand closely following Helen’s back. Once seated, he eyed the pulpit, fiddled his thumbs, and then tugged at the knot of his tie, which had suddenly begun to press stiffly against his neck. The pleasantries of the Christian atmosphere, at least on the front row on the right, had sunk to silent hostility.

Helen tilted her head to whisper. “You speak to my folks?”

“Yeah, I spoke,” Buck replied raising his voice hither than appropriate for sanctity. Betty bent forward to stare at him; he lowered his tone to a loud whisper.

“They ain’t part their lips to me and I’m getting’ sick and ti—“ His ranting was interrupted by Preacher Smith’s salutation.

“Greetings, church.” The reverend grabbed the podium with thick, dark brown hands and scanned the congregation with a slow and steady eye. Buck fidgeted on the hard bench. He had always felt the preacher’s sermons, scolding the wayward and the sinful, were directed singly toward him, addressing his indulgent acts of stealing and lying as a young boy and then as a young man, fornicating and drinking liquor. His conscience emerged as a racing pulse; silently he repented, never flinching, moving, or speaking a word.

Buck had never sauntered up to the front at the preacher’s call at the end of the sermon. He had had too much pride to yelp and holler to a God that allowed his people such misery and squalor. If the Lord could part the Red Sea, give David the strength to kill Goliath, make the blind see, then why couldn’t he lift the shackles off poor slave niggers’ feet or maim the pink arms that slung bloody scars on their backs? This bitter thought muted the choir, as he sat and observed the leathery brown skin drawn tight over high cheekbones—a younger version of Elder Smith, who had relinquished the ministry to his elder son. He wondered, watching the young Reverend’s stiff, upright movements, if living the clean and holy life was a burden for there was a detectable emptiness behind the preacher’s smile, which, plastered often, had evolved as more of a habit, rather than an expression of genuine feeling. As Buck nodded in rhythm to the piano playing, he decided that displaying the façade of perfection, scrutinized by both impressionable and critical eyes, must be the biggest burden of all. The keynotes and signing ceased; the deep, righteous voice resumed in even, monotone speaking. Buck glanced around at the faces of saints

and sinners alike, consummated as one large Colored face of devout attention. His own interest drifted throughout the sermon until his ears caught the hoarse rise in the Reverend's voice and the stomp of his shiny black patent leather shoes, and his eyes, not attentive, witnessed the flinging of the preacher's long black robe. He looked to the young reverends squinted face, now dripping sweat.

"The Bible says, 'Set thine house in order for thou shalt live and not die!' Some of y'all, Amen, think this mean making sho' the door is locked...to keep the thieves out...making sho' the windows is shut to keep the cold out...uh..making sho' the roof...I say, the roof is shingled...uh..to keep the rain and snow out. The good book here tells me and I'm gon' to tell you—ain't none of that gon' keep the Devil out if you ain't living right! Hallelujah! Don't you worry 'bout the dishes piled up in the sink more than you worried 'bout obeying your husband... don't you sorry 'bout the grass done grewed 'round the front steps more than you worried 'bout doing away with your lustful ways and cheating on you' wife with a wayward woman! My God tells me to set mine house in order—not to worry 'bout filling it up with no fancy furniture—most of them folks ain't got Christian love in their hearts...My God, I say, my God tells me to fill it, I say fill it up, with love and respect," he raised his fisted hands to the flaky ceiling, "so that goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life! My house might not be spotless, might be a little dirt on the floor or a few dishes in the sink." He looked down and smiled at his wife. "Amen, Mrs. Smith, but in my house, I tell you," he pointed a righteous finger out at the congregation. "I done put God in my life and prayer in my house, and he done set it in order! Houses ain't held together by nails and screws—they held together by the grace of God and they falter by the deeds of the sinner! Set thine house in order...for thou shalt live...and not die! Glory! Glory to God!" he shouted and raised his fists to the ceiling once more. "Glory to the

Holy Ghost that dwells in this house, touching hearts and setting the souls of the weak and the weary and the sinful free!”

The small wooden church filled with a clamor of clapping and shouts of “hallelujah!” Buck sat stolid and still, the words “lustful” and “sinner” striking a chord in him. He looked away from the preacher, fearful that their eyes would meet and he would know Buck’s black soul. He swallowed hard, trying to dislodge the nagging knot in his throat that brought water to his eyes and sweat to his temples. Helen, as though sensing his guilt, reached over to gently place her hand overtop his. She smiled in subtle affection, keeping her eyes on the pulpit.

Buck knew then that she had forgiven his adultery without bitterness. This fact, more than the Reverend’s fiery words, spoke a message to his heart, and though he nodded no “amens” nor raised his hand for testimony, he did lower his head in repentance to thank the Lord. He remained humble, standing at the pulpit alongside his wife and bowing his head to the blessings bestowed upon Mary Agnes; patient, standing alongside Helen’s folks after the service, and later, understanding, lying beside her, listening to her proclaimed need to return to work.

Chapter Five

Amid sunshine and dust, the walk to the Sutherlands seemed shorter than usual. The quaintly pleasant scent of honeysuckle and pine permeated Helen's senses. She grabbed up her long skirt, slinging it from one side to the other, and absorbed the faint breeze it generated. Her head full of tunes, she sang most of the way and then hummed when her voice grew thin. Even the foreboding thought of Miss Anne did not parch her carols or slow her steady pace. She had not seen Mister John since that memorable day that Mary Agnes was born; she wanted to thank him.

Entering through the back door, she had expected to find Miss Anne there in the kitchen, waiting to load her down with chores. Instead, she was greeted by Lil' Kitty, who purred and folded its soft, furry form around her right leg, tickling her with its long tail.

"Scat away, you old cat!" she said, a hint of tolerance softening her voice. The cat had followed her to the Hoosier cabinet and perched itself between her stance. It stared up at her with intense yellow eyes, as though trying to divulge some pertinent information, and moved only when she inched it from one side to the other with her feet.

"Lil Kitty," she said, as though talking to a small child, "what's done got into you? And where is your Mama this morning?"

Having gone out to fetch well water, filling the kettle, and setting it on the stove to boil, still there was neither sight nor sound of Miss Anne. Her curiosity piqued, she traipsed from the kitchen down the hall, peeping in doorways and calling.

“Miss Anne?...Miss Anne?..... Yoohoo.”

Silence. Curiosity led her upstairs. Miss Anne?...(to the first boudoir on the right)... Miss Anne? ... (to the guest boudoir on the left).... Miss Anne? She stopped. Whimpers. Whispers. Farther down the hall, perhaps the master boudoir. One cautious foot at a time, she treaded the corridor until she reached the source of this peculiar noise, a noise that she would hear sometimes in the climax of a bad dream, waking from it in a cold sweat, or in the wind, as thin and eerie as an echo, a noise that she would never forget, even years later... the noise of a sick man, the deep-throated whine of affliction.

She boldly opened the door from which the miserable cries came to discover a pitiful sight. A few feet away lay Mister John, rolling his head listlessly from side to side in a frenzy of disorientation and misery. Miss Anne hovered over him, wiping the dampness from his forehead and whispering softly to him.

Stranger than this healthy man transfigured and laid out, was the sight of Miss Anne. Absorbing it all, Helen’s brows crinkled with confusion and worry; she stood silent and immobile. Miss Anne, engrossed in grief, had not noticed Helen standing there until she was forced to look elsewhere, beyond her husband’s pitiful countenance, for a dry cloth to pat away on pouring sweat. She at first spotted Helen’s shoes and lifted her eyes slowly to trail the length of her. They stared without speaking.

“What is it, Miss Anne?”

She returned to her attention to her husband. “The doctor zed rheumatic fever.”

Helen remembered Betty talk about Buck's sister who had died from some fever. She wondered if it was the same one. "Can I do something' to help, Miss Anne?" She asked, awkwardly.

Frowning, she answered with few words. "The doctor said notting more can be done, only vait and pray."

"Lord, I's so sorry, Miss Anne." Helen searched for more words of consolement, but she found none.

"Save your vorries," Miss Anne scoffed. "If you vant to do somethingg, go fetch a pitcher of orange juice for him."

She remembered the tea kettle, which she was certain would be whistling soon. "Yes'm," she called back, scurrying off.

In a voice cut short from hoarseness, Mister John spoke. "Was that—Helen—I—heard?"

"Yes."

He strained to speak. "Tell her—to—come—here."

"Now, John..."

Even in failing health, he was stubborn. "Tell—her."

Miss Anne let out a child-like, annoyed huff and perched her long fingers on her bony hip. "Helen!"

The familiar shriek stopped her feet in their tracks. She turned to answer, stretching her neck in an attempt to raise her voice to a high pitched choral that would trail the stairway and bend around the upstairs corner to Miss Anne. "Yes'm?"

"Come here, now."

Fearing some sudden misfortune, she hurried back. Things looked the same. Lord, was he dead? The thought crossed her mind in a flood of panic that compelled her to rush to him, stepping in front of Miss Anne to peer at him. His eyes, misty and half-shut, were still half-open. Relieved, Helen let out a “thank goodness” sigh and placed her hand on his. He smiled weakly at her and turned to Miss Anne.

“Fetch me ano—ther blan—ket, dear—our special one—from Mother—up—in—the – attic.” The more he tried to speak, the less audible his words became. If he had had the strength, he would have smiled a mischievous grin and then winked at Helen. But the game had played long enough so that each understood; Miss Anne did, too, and she hated him for it, even now.

“Do not bother him vit a whole lot of talk; he needs to save his strength.” She cleared her throat and marched out of the room, leaving Mister John and Helen alone.

“Hel-en.” He forced himself to speak, though sickness barely permitted him to breathe.

“Yes sah?” she asked, bending closely over him.

“Hel-en.” He swallowed hard and Helen watched his pale face, shrunken and tight around his cheekbones, hollow and sagging beneath his eyes.

“I...wa—nt...you...to...” Some unknown, mysterious force was slowly sucking the life out of Mister John. He must have appeared so fatigued and drained, Helen concluded, from beckoning and then fighting with it to allow him more time.”

“Yes sah?” Stray tears emerged from her downcast eyes. Her left hand wiped them away briskly, while her right hand squeezed his palm tightly, offering comfort through his pain. She stood alongside him, as he had done for her.

He took in a breath and continued. “.....look af—ter Miss Anne.... She needs you.....”

“Mista John, ain’t no need in you talkin’ crazy like you gon’—“ She couldn’t bring herself to say the word “die” for fear that the utterance of it would make it a reality. She continued, speaking quickly and nervously. “Besides, can’t nobody look afta Miss Anne but you...she wouldn’t let nobody else, even if they tried.” She let out a short laugh, but no humor could be found, not now.

“Ple—ease. Pro--mise me.”

Her forced smile faded into a closed mouth, parted only to fulfill his wish. “Yes, Mista John, I promise, but...”

“Tha—nk you, He—len.”

Helen continued rambling. “But Mista John, you wait, I got a special concoction—a stew my Mama taught me how to make—got some peas and carrots and onions—and I’ll get Buck to go huntin’ and bring back a fat ole rabbit—then get some garlic—yes sah—that garlic’ll knock out any kind o’ sickness...Mista John?”

He had closed his eyes and succumbed to the force that snips breath, stops pulses, and shuts down thought and feeling. She patted his hand softly to wake him. She tapped his check with more urgency. Before she realized it, she had lifted his shoulders and was shaking him. “Mista John! Ohh, Lord! Lord, no!” She scanned the room with frantic eyes, fearful of death, whose spirit lurked triumphantly in the still room. Mournful over the loss of a dear friend, she wept in large, uncontrollable sobs.

“Vhat is it? Vhat happened?” Miss Anne, hearing the cries, had hurried back. She stood over the bed, her expression dropping to a cross between disappointment and anger.

The wails traveled outside to Jim. His hacking arms stopped mid-motion and he turned his ear to the noise. Immediately, he dropped the hoe to follow it. It led him to the master

boudoir, where he found Miss Anne weeping alongside Mister John and Helen standing over her, rubbing her back in a consoling, circular motion.

“What happen?” he asked, already knowing. Not the questions itself, but rather his voice, reverted Helen’s attention. Her ears opened to the whistling tea kettle and she gained composure enough to venture downstairs.

Between shaking finger, she steadied two cups—careful so not to slosh the hot liquid onto her wrist—as she stepped gingerly up the stairs. Her thoughts rested solely on the cups, blocking out all grief. For a single moment she drifted back to normalcy; her plight was simple. She would deliver a cup of tea to Miss Anne, and, having taken the liberty of pouring herself one, she would drink with her. The sharpness of Miss Anne’s voice crashed into Helen’s train of thought so that she was left limp and disorientated.

“What are you doing?” She stood at the top of the stairs and peered down with narrow, reddened eyes.

“I—“ Helen searched for a reason, thinking clear only moments earlier. “I thought you might like some tea.”

“Then why do you have two cups?”

Her search for words commenced again. “I...thought I would have one, too.”

Miss Anne raised her brow. “Oh, you did, did you? Well, that was very thoughtful of you, but quite frankly, I think I would like to be left alone now. There’s plenty of business I need to take care of. You may leave now. But I shall need you tomorrow, bright and early. The house must be spotless and I will need you to prepare food.”

“Yes’m,” Helen replied softly. Having reached the top of the stairs, in close proximity to Mister John, she was reminded of his anguish from moments earlier. As she held the cup out to Miss Anne and stared at her thin, hard-features, she heard his words: “Look after Miss Anne.”

“The back door,” she reminded Helen, watching her proceed down the stairs.

As the thick door slammed, Helen wiped a single tear from her eye, one that welled for the sudden death of a decent man or the bleakness of the promise she had made to him—she wasn’t sure which. Either way, the tear sprang from heartache at its peak, and she refused to wipe it, letting it rest halfway down her cheek. She remembered then, that she had not gotten the chance to thank Mister John for all his help in delivering Mary Agnes... or for his kindness throughout the years. Her happy caroling from only hours earlier had now transformed into a dismal gloom.

“All in life,” Miss Betty often declared at the spirals, twits, and turns of living. “Sometimes, when the world hit rock bottom, you gotta fall wit’ it. But it keep on turning—always gon’ be sunrise.” Too bad that today, with the taunting of pleasant weather, it had started to drizzle.

“All in life,” Helen repeated aloud, wrapping the bonnet over her head, pulling her blouse tight over her chest and peering up at army of dark clouds twirling above her in a haze of smoky grey. As she quickened her gait, she felt the splatter of heavy rain wetting her hair and shoulders.

Chapter Six

“Buck, is you listenin’ to me? I tell you—Mista John dead!”

Buck attempted to concentrate on what his wife was saying. With conscious effort he frowned, sloping his thick brows, shaking his head, and biting down on his full bottom lip. “Sho’ is a shame, Helen.”

As Helen continued to explain the sudden tragedy, the volume of her voice grew faint and then totally inaudible, for in an instant, his face straightened, his eyes shifted back to their hazy look, and his mind wandered back to the shiny black motorcar he had seen earlier in town. A “Model T” he thought he heard someone call it.

Like Buck, folks had stopped to stare, mouths agape, as they traipsed out of the small country store, the bank, and the post office to witness the debut of Henry Ford’s new invention. Mister Jenson, the first local buyer, with a fixed stare and with both pale hands gripped tightly to the black steering wheel, made his way at a slow pace down the partially graveled roadway, parking in the center of Saturday strolling and shopping. Didn’t seem any faster than the trot of a good horse, Buck assessed, but, still, this carriage, run by a motor, with wheels and an engine, seemed much more appealing and high class. Staring at it, his dim eyes filled with what, if he could name it, seemed like longing, and as he chewed and shifted the small piece of straw from one side of his moth to the other, he had set his mind on owning one.

Spewing tobacco, he had stood outside the old country store, impatiently awaiting Sammy Nash, and eyeing the vehicle that sat conspicuously in front of the bank.

“Man, look over there,” he pointed, grabbing Sammy by his bony shoulder as he stepped through the doorway.

Sammy opened his fresh pack of tobacco and inserted a wad into his mouth. He squinted where Buck had pointed. “At what?”

“Nigga, is you blind?” Over there by the bank!”

Sammy squinted again and then when he focused, his eyes quickly widened. “Well, looky there! A motorcar! My cousin Huey from up North tole me about ‘em. He say it’s a whole lot of city folks show-boatin’ in style in them things!” He flashed his bucked, dingy teeth and shook his head in awe.

“Let’s get one!” Buck blurted in excitement.

Sammy’s smile closed. Looking over at Buck, he shook his head condescendingly. Another fool idea, he thought. “Now, how you think us, two po’, black scandrels, can scrape up the money to buy us one o’ them there fancy lux’ries?”

Buck twisted the straw between his teeth. “That’s yo’ trouble. You ack like the good shit in life got white folks’ name written on it. Well, what’s good for the goose is good for the gander!” He squatted down and flapped his arms in and out. “This here is the gander!” He raised to a straight stance and smiled.

“You’s a fool!” Sammy again shook his head.

Buck smoothed down his thick mustache and scratched the stubble under his chin in ambitious thought. “Call me a fool if you want,” he declared, “but I’ll bet you a whole case of moonshine that Buck Carrington gon’ buy hisself one!”

“Just how you think you gon’ do that?” Sammy didn’t wait for a response. He had strolled over to his horse and patted her side affectionately, as he untied the hitch.

“I’ll think of something’,” Buck muttered. Eyes misted, he trodded over to the wagon and hopped aimlessly onto the iron seat. “Play cards,” he uttered, still staring into space, a smile slowly parting his full lips.

Sammy peered over at him, knowingly. He shook the reins and smiled, as the familiarity of mischief filled his head and Buck’s, too.

Mischief had played an integral role in the lives of Buck and Sammy for many years. As young boys, cocky and sharp-witted, they had been a devilish pair—Buck, the leader, coaxing Sammy to participate in his calculated folly. Often times, in the still of the night, they had sneaked out of their houses to climb the fence to Mister Jenson’s peach orchard and stuffed their pockets, each aware of the deadly penalty for Coloreds who trespassed and stole on white man’s property—no trial, no questions asked, the white man’s word deemed valid over the silence of a stiff, sprawled out Negro. One night they had laughed too loud and lingered too long and a dim lantern light in an upstairs window sparked their fears and fledged their feet. When they had crossed onto the main road to safety, they squatted, out of breath, their hearts racing.

“Fool—you—tryin—to get—us killed, ain’t ya?” Sammy huffed out between breaths. Sweating, relishing in the victory of thievery, Buck had grinned and said nothing.

Time passed, and as the muscles in their chests began to bulge out beneath their shirts, the length of their breeches shrank high above their ankles, and thin hair fuzzed the bottoms of their chins, their boyish plight of mischief crossed over to the boundary of manhood. The evolution began with smoking. Puffing and coughing, it had taken Sammy a while to successfully ingest the harsh fumes into his untainted lungs; Buck stood alongside him, mocking

his choking and coughing. On hot nights, restless and lying alone, each was driven by unexpected urges and fleshly thoughts. When their palms grew calloused, their lungs black, and thin fuzz rooted itself in thickness on more private parts, they commenced to chasing women, gambling, and drinking corn liquor.

This empty plight of drinking and gallivanting had filed Buck's evenings and nights, and consumed his mind during the day. Betty, who had witnessed the transformation, would declare, watching him with narrowed eyes and shaking her head in motherly dismay, as he would wash beneath his arms and drench himself in cheap cologne, that her boy, now a man, was "Sho' smellin' his piss! Liquor don't make you grown, but it'll sho' make you a fool!" she'd holler after him. "You memba what happen to your Uncle Jed!"

Buck had heard the story of his Uncle Jed countless times. Uncle Jed, who had gone on a moonshine binge one night and staggered to the town sheriff's house, a path he knew well, for he had performed many odd jobs there. Once he had reached the premises, he pulled out his pocketknife, tapped at the latch on the back door until it gave way, and proceeded to tip over the creaking floorboards that led to the cupboard in the dining room. Poor Jed coveted not good china or sparkling silver, but cornmeal and jars of jam. The jangling of glassware and his clumsy shuffling awoke the mistress of the house and so she stepped quietly, without rousing her husband, to the source of the noise. She let out a wail upon discovering the bulky form of a Negro rifling through her property. Uncle Jed, startled, but mostly disoriented, tried to quiet her, to convince her that he didn't mean her any harm, but his explanation was silenced by a gun shot, fired by the sheriff. Because of this brazen act and the fear of others like it, many innocent Negroes lost their lives, and, those who were lucky scraped by stripped only of their dignity. "Drinkin' don't jut hurt the fool who drunk, it spread to everybody else, like poison."

Buck believed moonshine was poison—couldn't anything but poison scorch his throat, tear his eyes, and twist his face to a gnarl, but he didn't care. That colorless, shiny liquid, as clear as spring water, not only burned his throat, but somehow set fire to his breeches, his sexual prowess rising with each shot of whiskey. Ultimately, he had earned himself the reputation of a ladies' man. Wearing the title proudly, parading his burly chest and broad shoulders with a confidence that drew a swarm of admiring feminine smiles to his realm, he evoked the secret envy and overt respect of his cronies.

Inevitably, the cheating ways that Buck had practiced as a young boy, rolling die underneath the big oak tree, had carried over to the small table at Cooke's. Over the years, he and Sammy had formulated a code of deception that allowed them knowledge of each other's hands. A scratch on the head signified an ace; smoothing down the mustache—a deuce, caressing a chin—a queen. Overall, they had over fifty secret signals that enabled them to cheat—and to win.

Late that night at a flimsy wood table in the local juke, the two men joined Stutt, June Bug, and High Pocket for what seemed to be a little fun and easy gambling. Squinting into focus and chewing on toothpicks, Buck and Sammy cupped, shifted and covered their cards. With each strategic move, they scratched, rubbed, and patted. High Pocket, feeling angry at the disappearance of his whole week's pay right before his eyes, flared his nostrils and smelled something fishy. He scratched his knotty head and frowned, still holding his cards steady, but eyeing Buck and then Sammy with a glare that made them perspire beneath their gingham collars. "Seem mighty funny," he pointed, "that every time we gets in a game with these two, everybody else end up losin' and these two end up makin' off with the pot!"

Just then, Stutt, who had acquired the name due to his speech impediment, began twirling the tangles on his wooly mass of hair. High Pocket's statement sparked a dim light in his head. "You know, High P-ock-et, I been won-won-der--in' 'bout the same thing. Don't mm-make sense."

Feeling the walls of scrutiny close in, Buck let out a nervous chuckle. "Damn, nigga can't get lucky 'round these parts wit'out somebody 'cusin' him of cheatin'."

June Bug jumped in. "Maybe they done got theirselves one o' them marked decks." He studied the design on the back of the card. "I heard they sellin' 'em up in Buckingham."

Flatly denying the accusations, Sammy shook his head. "Man, ain't nobody playin' wit' no marked deck—you can check 'em with bifocals if you want—you ain't gon' find nothing." Buck, seizing the opportunity to bail out, pushed the chips to the middle of the table. "Man, forget this. I got betta things to do than sit here being 'cused of cheatin.' Let's go, Sammy." Stutt rose from his seat. His hand brushed over several poker chips, spilling them off the side of the table. His hands slowly clenched into fists and he glared at Buck, still seated. Glaring back, Buck rose to meet his challenge. "What you raisin' up for? You can't whip no ass 'round here!" "Says who?" Stutt inched closer. His fury was the result of his own carelessness, for prudently saving up for nearly a year and then foolishly gambling it all away. But he could beat himself up in his mind later—right now, he would direct his rage toward Buck.

Absorbing each other's liquored breath, the tips of their broad noses met. Their confrontation had silenced the entire room.

Conscious of his audience, Stutt tried to keep their attention. He spat his words in Buck's face. "LLL-Let's take it outsss-side!" He then followed Buck's heels into the darkness.

“Now, look,” Sammy reasoned, just a step ahead of the crowd of onlookers who were rushing to follow the two men, “ain’t no need in gettin’ all uptight. Buck ain’t done nothing for y’all to fight for!”

Outside, Buck and Stutt circled the dirt, their fists raised at eye level.

“Hit ‘im!” someone shouted.

They continued to circle, their fists blocking their faces.

“I ought-ta kk-kick your ass, you cheatin’ bastard!” Stutt yelled still circling.

Buck answered his threat by throwing a swift first blow, hitting Stutt square in the eye.

Stutt wobbled, as though he were about to lose his balance, but, somehow, managed to keep standing. “Why you--” Stutt swung and missed, falling face first in the dirt.

“Drunken fool!” Buck yelled, standing over him. High Pocket and June Bug helped Stutt up, and though cheated and angry themselves, they refused to challenge him again. Buck swaggered away. His arrogance made Stutt break free from the grips of June Bug and High Pocket. He caught up to Buck, swirled around, and waved the shiny metal of a switch blade in his face. An onlooker caught sight of this and waved the crowd to come watch. Buck’s eyes widened though he still managed to keep his voice steady. “Well, I be damned. Nigga can’t throw a good punch, so he pull out a knife to do his fightin’ for him!”

“Yeah, so what ‘bout it!” Stutt hollered, swiping at him and missing Buck’s dodge. Let’s see if you can whip my blade’s ass!” he swung again and this time nicked Buck in the side. Buck grabbed the sharp pain and then looked down at it to see if it was bleeding. Not much. But by the time he looked up again, Stutt was aiming for another swipe. This time June Bug caught his arm in mid-air. “Stutt, get holda yo’self. A drunk and a blade is two things that don’t match up—you liable to get yo’self killed out here!” He turned to Buck. “Buck, you and Sammy say you won’t

cheatin'. Maybe. Maybe not. But I know one thing—dice don't lie. If you was that lucky wit' cards, the moon still the same—you still gon' be lucky wit' dice."

"Man, I ain't got time for shootin' craps. I got to go home and let my woman tend to my cut." He wanted to break free with his winnings.

"Well, look here, Buck. If you can't give Stutt and the rest of us the chance to win some of our money back, then you'se a cheatin' bastard and a liar and tain't no use in you coming round to gamble wit' us no more, 'cause we never gon' aim to play wit' the likes of you again!"

Buck gulped and tried to swallow his nervousness but it lodged in his throat and he coughed. He knew Stutt meant business. He had to prove his lie to be the truth and the only way to do that was to gamble again, fair and square. "Somebody go fetch me a rag to tie up this here cut."

"Sweet Pea, go fetch a rag from Mister Cooke," June Bug ordered one of the girls standing near.

"So what's it gon' be, Buck? You gon' keep cryin' 'bout that cut, or is you tryin' to shoot craps?"

June Bug eyed Sammy. "You in?"

"Nah, Buck's the one y'all want." The men stood, each, except Buck, pulling the last crumpled bills from their pockets. They all dropped their knees to the dirt. June Bug pulled two die out his overall pocket, blew on and rolled them around in his dusty palm. He spat on them for warmth and for luck. The crowd bent a circle around their backs and watched with anticipation. June Bug rolled out a five and a two. He smiled brightly—luck could be on his side. Picking up the die again, he flung out a four and a three. "Damn!" He hollered out, shaking his head. "I don't b'live this sh—"

“My go,” Stutt interrupted. “I’m gon’ make Buck’s black face turn yella.” The die rolled a two and a one.

Buck grinned. “Nigga, you aint nothing but dog wit’ a whole lot of bark and no damn bite!”

“Move over, Stutt!” Buck yelled, clinching his side to stifle the pain. Buck vigorously shook the small squares in his clutched fist. He rolled out a six and a five, then a three and a two, then two fives, and four and a three.

Sammy shook his head, smiling, and the other stooped men stared in disbelief. “Well, I be—“

Buck laughed away all the fear that had built inside. The full moon had sided with him again, and he kept laughing as he rose to bid them goodbye. “Y’all got yo’ chance—fair and square.” Holding the rag to his side, he limped away. Sammy ran after him and together, they climbed side-by-side onto the wagon’s narrow wooded bench. Buck spat out a wad of tobacco, as Sammy hied his horse to movement.

In straight-faced silence, they traveled down the dark and lonesome dirt road. When he felt he had reached a comfortable distance, Buck, unable to contain himself, let out a loud yelp that echoed among the trees and the midnight sky. “Yoo-hoo! Hot damn!” He reached inside his pants pocket to retrieve a mass of crumbled bills. He gazed at the money, smiling a toothy grin. “Tomorra, bright and early, I’m goin’ straight to Mista Charlie, and I’m gon’ get down on one knee and like a humble ole slave and I’m gon’ say, “Please, Mista Charlie, let this poor old nigra have hisself one o’ them there motorcars. I needs it for my Mama—she getting’ old and she ain’t got no business walking all them miles to work. And for my wife, too—she gon’ get old before her time, always on her feet, always workin’. Please, suh! And then that ole cracka gon’ look me

dead in the eye, plaster a big ole grin on his face, and come from ‘round his desk to stand next to me. He gon’ pat me on the head like a lil’ ole dog and say, ‘Boy, ain’t no need in you gettin’ yo’ hopes set on no motorcar. Ain’t no way on God’s green earth you can afford one of ‘em. If there was anything, anything at all I could do to help you out, you know I would, but my hands are tied! If I help you out, then every other poor nigra would expect it, and I just ain’t able to do that—no matter how bad I want to!’”

“What you gon’ say then, Buck?” Sammy asked, tickled by Buck’s melodrama.

Pleased to indulge and entertain Sammy, he grinned. “Well, then I’m gon’ rise up off my knees, look him straight in the eye, and say, ‘I see five hundred dollars out there on the hood and I got one hundred and fifty big ones in my pocket. Let me pay the rest on time—if I miss one payment, you can come get it!’” Buck looked over at Sammy. “Now, he gon’ turn beet red—don’t think he ain’t, but how many men—Colored or white—can wheel and deal like that?”

“Nigga, you know you ain’t gon’ go in there cocky like that!” Sammy teased.

“Humph. Just wait and see,” Buck replied with a nod of confidence. Ole Buck’s skin might be black, but his money is as green as the next man’s!”

Buck’s vision of the motorcar transaction did not transpire exactly as he anticipated, though Mister Charlie Smithfield did stifle a cough when Buck pulled out his money.

“Boy,” Mister Charlie’s face twisted in reluctance, as he stared down at the mass of crumpled bills piled high on his desk, “where you get this here kind of money?” He shifted the saliva-stained tip of his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other.

“Sir, I-I been savin’,” Buck stammered.

Mister Smithfield, still staring at the money, scratched his bald head with large chubby fingers. “I don’t know many nigras can save up this kind of money. How much you got there?”

“One hundred and fifty seven dollars, sir.”

“Well now, boy. You know a motor car costs near eight hundred dollars. What you got there ain’t really a drop in the bucket.”

“Sir—Mister Charlie”—Buck swallowed hard. “If you take this here heap o’ cash that I done saved up as a down payment, I swear on my Daddy’s grave that you can depend on me to come by here every Friday when I get my pay and put five more dollars on it. That’d be twenty dollars a month, sir.”

Mister Charlie looked doubtful. Buck eyed him earnestly. He felt the familiar ache of denial. He looked away, pondering a moment, his fists thrust deeply in his now empty pockets. He thought his money would have spoken all that his mouth could not. Perspiration dotted his dark temples.

“Sir, please,” Buck turned to him. “If you want me to beg, I will do it. I am begging for a chance.”

Content to have reduced Buck to a more humble state, Mister Smithfield smiled. “I just don’t know, Buck.” He rubbed under his chin. “Why don’t you take your money and let me think on it?”

Buck knew that if he sought the advice of others and divulged the fact that this nigra had been so uppity as to come and inquire about ownership of a motorcar, he would be advised to deny him. Buck grew desperate. “Sir, please!” He got down on one knee, disgusted with himself but determined. “Just gimme a chance!” He lifted himself, brushed off his pants leg.

“It does something to my heartstrings to see a nigra beg. Reminds me of the good old days.” Mister Charlie was at his desk now, shuffling through a drawer full of papers. He pulled out a form and a fountain pen. He dipped the pen in a small container of ink and marked an “x”

for Buck to sign. He sighed heavily. “Against my better thinking, I’m gon’ give you a chance, boy. I knowed your daddy—he worked for my own Daddy—he was a good, hard-working boy—my family could always depend on him—never lied, never stole in all the years he served us.”

“Yes, sir,” Buck said. He knew he father was honest.

“How long you been workin’ for the Stinells’?”

“Twelve years, sir—never missed a day of work.”

Mister Charlie nodded, not for Buck, but for Buck’s father, and maybe even for God’s ledger of good deeds. He held out the pen, a white hand outstretched to a black one. Buck smiled and reached eagerly for it. Mister Charlie hastily pulled it away. “One missed payment,” he warned,” and I’m coming out there to that hill to get it.” He watched Buck scribble a barely legible signature and then he stiffened as Buck grabbed hold of both of his pale hands and graciously shook them. “Thank you, sir!” You won’t be sorry! I swear by it!” Buck could not contain his grin. He stepped out of the dingy building and strutted over to a shiny black motorcar that he could call his own.

Through Buck had had no experience driving, it seemed to come natural to him. He made his way home with his new prize, honking loudly. Many folks had run to their doors and windows to see what all the noise was about, and when they spotted Buck, with one arm out the window, waving at them, their mouths had dropped in disbelief. Nearing his house, he honked the whole way up the hill, so that by the time he reached the head of the driveway, Betty and Helen stood, waiting and watching, on the edge of the front porch.

Buck got out, slammed the door shut, and patted the hood. “Well, what you waiting for?

Come on over and have a look!”

In their scrutiny, Betty and Helen walked a slow circle around the car, inspecting it thoroughly. Buck followed closely behind Helen. When she stopped, he wrapped his arms tightly around her waist and kissed her hard on the cheek. He squeezed her torso. Betty, who still stood eyeing the car dubiously, finally spoke. “Boy, how much you pay for this here thing?”

“Mama, don’t worry. ‘bout the cost!”

Betty persisted. “Boy, how you afford a fancy thing like this here?”

Buck parted his lips to a half-smile. Buck Carrington make a way.”

Shaking her thick finger at him, she warned, “Now, I know you ain’t gone out here and done nothing fool ‘cause I done tole—“

Buck raised his finger to her lip. “Look, Mama, I got it and I swear on my Daddy’s grave I ain’t done nothing to go to jail for.”

“I ain’t raised none of my chirren to swear and ‘specially not on nobody’s grave!” Betty started at Buck a moment, searching for the truth. “You mean to tell me you ain’t lied or stealed to get a thing like this here?” She pointed at the motorcar and stared back at him.

Buck avoided her eyes by grabbing her waistline and swooping his mother’s large frame in the air. “Mama, hush now! I say I ain’t goin’ to jail!”

“Put me down, boy! You aint’ too big for me to skin you!”

Buck, with quite an effort, set his mother’s leather tie-up shoes to the ground, though he still hugged her by the waist. Staring at its shine, Betty couldn’t resist the excitement. She nervously twisted her chubby hands. “Well, I reckon I done got so big, I don’t know if my behind can fit in one of them things.” She frowned, shook her head. “It look so small!”

“Ain’t gon’ be problem getting’ you in, but first, let me see if I can fit Helen in.” He glanced over at her. “I’m gon’ teach her how to drive!”

Helen shook her head and backed two steps away from the challenge. “Now, Buck, I can’t drive!”

He pulled her toward him. “Yes, you can, baby! Just let me learn you how—it ain’t hard!” Still grinning, he pulled her by the hand to the driver’s side, opened the door for her, and then scurried over to the passenger side and hopped in. “Okay, no, the first thing you need to learn is how to crank this baby up.” He reached over and wound the started and then released the clutch. The engine whinnied, popped, and then purred.

“Lord, this thing sure is loud!” Helen yelled over the pitter patter.

“Now, put your foot on the pedal, keep both hands on the wheel and both eyes on the road!” he responded, yelling over the noise.

Helen sucked in a deep breath and steered the black car in a zig-zag down the bumpy hill. Betty stood alone, shaking her head and smiling.

Buck’s courage inspired Sammy. He wanted his own motorcar. He didn’t know when or how he would get one. But somehow the odds didn’t stop him from wishing. Perhaps, a Colored man could have his piece of the pie, too.

“Hell on wheels!” Betty would shout, watching the two sit side-by-side in Buck’s shiny new toy. With her eldest daughter arriving by train the next day from the big city, she was glad that Buck could show Hazel Belle that country folks lived good, too!

Chapter Seven

Hazel Belle Carrington stood alongside a small black train car, stretching her neck and squinting her eyes. Her attire, a feathered black hat, black felt suit, and matching purse, drew several admiring stares. Spotting Buck from the back, the mass of thick crinkly hair and the wide-legged stance, she strolled over to him and nudged him teasingly on the shoulder. “What are you standing there looking fool for?” she asked, deliberately evading a sentimental greeting. “Get my suitcase and then get me to Mama’s as fast as that ole horse and buggy of yours can run! I ain’t had nothing to eat all day and I’m starved!”

Buck grabbed her bag and raised his brow, scanning her skinny frame. “Don’t look like you been eatin’ nothing where you come from, so what make you wanna start now? Besides, Mama ain’t thinking ‘bout your narrow tail. We done already had supper and I cleaned the pot!”

Hazel Belle responded by turning up her nose and walking ahead of him. Buck smiled and followed close behind; even as a boy he could always manage to ruffle his prim sister’s feathers. Jangling his keys in his pocket and toting her bags, he quickly stepped in her way and stopped just in front of his prized possession. Showing off, he sat down her bags, spit on the tips of his fore and index fingers and wiped a smudge off the metal headlight.

Looking around at the people who strolled past, Hazel Belle, quite embarrassed, shook her head at her youngest sibling in familiar dismay. “Buck, you still just as fool as ever! Puttin’ your

grubby black fingers on white man's property. You ain't gon' be satisfied till they throw you in jail or lynch you!"

Buck smiled. "Now, how you think they gon' lynch a man for touchin' his own property?"

Hazel Belle fluttered her lashes and huffed. "Look here, Buck, I ain't got time for no games. My feet is hurtin' and my stomach is growlin' and..."

She rambled, shaking her head as Buck opened the door on the passenger side for her and guided her in by the shoulder onto the seat. She continued to chatter to drown out his whistling. This continued the whole ride home and even as they sauntered up the path of rocks to the house. She chattered through the kitchen and into the parlor, where Betty, who was settled in her rocking chair, and Helen, who was rocking Mary Agnes, sat waiting for her. "Mama, I don't know what this fool son of yours is up to, but he fittin' to get shot—got somebody's motorcar don't belong to him and drivin' it around like he's a king!"

Her mother put her hands on her hip. "Well, Miss Hazel Belle, who done gone to the big city and forgot the good manners her Mama taught her—good evenin' to you, too!"

"Sorry, Mama." Flustered, Hazel Belle bent to kiss Betty on the roundness of her cheek. "How you, Helen?" As she turned to greet her sister-in-law, she quickly noticed the small bundle Helen was lulling in her arms, and she did not wait for permission to take the baby from her mother—she swooped up Mary Agnes, lifting her over her head to smile up at her. "And just look-a-here at this pretty little chocolate baby," she cooed in baby talk and gazed affectionately at her niece, taking note of all of her features, especially her wide-set, quiet eyes.

Disappointment replaced excitement, for Hazel Belle's cuddling time was short—Mary Agnes'

mouth opened to let out a loud wail. “Now, now,” she said, softly bouncing her and handing her back to Helen. “Ain’t no need in frettin’. Ain’t nobody but your Aunt Hazel Belle!”

As Hazel Belle bent over her niece, now in Helen’s lap, to wiggle her little fingers and coo at her, she felt Betty’s familiar scrutiny and braced herself for the usual questions.

“Is you been eatin’, chile? You look like skin and bones!”

Hazel Belle didn’t bother to answer. She knew her response would be unconvincing and she knew the command that would follow. “Come on in this kitchen and let your Mama feed you a good, home-cooked supper. I got plenny fixed, and I see you ain’t spending no time in the kitchen!”

“Yes ma’am.” Before leaving the parlor, she stopped at the doorway and glanced at Buck, a smirk raising her dark brows.

Hazel Belle sat at the round table, while Betty, who had busied herself opening and spooning from pots, paused in between to stare at her. The tone of her mother’s voice softened. “Sammy gon’ stop by here—he heard you was coming for a visit.”

“Is he?” Hazel Belle tried to sound casual. She smoothed down a crinkle in the vinyl tablecloth.

As she watched Betty step out onto the side porch and amble over to the small icebox of ice to cool the pitcher of tea she had prepared, she knew much more than fixing a meal was on her mind. Hazel Belle realized—she wasn’t blind-- that Betty had blessed all her offspring with good looks, and she was also aware that she was certainly Betty’s prettiest child, and so without having children, passing along her good genes, Hazel Belle, as her mother would say, was “pretty gone to waste.” From where Hazel Belle sat, she noted the ice that Betty held begin to melt, trickling down the folds of her mother’s palm and down her sleeve. Hazel Belle also

would bet her last dime about what her mother was thinking right at that moment. Betty was wondering how her child could be so selfish, keeping what blessings God gave her all to herself.

“Mama, you alright?” Hazel Belle called out. Helen and Buck had joined her at the table. Betty quickly dropped the chunks of ice into a small tin bucket. Back in the kitchen, she belched into her fisted hand, as she spooned, sliced, and poured.

“So how you makin’ it in that big ole lonely city?” Buck asked, in between sucking his teeth and licking his lips over Betty’s flaky apple pie.

Hazel Belle sipped ladylike from her glass. “Well, I’ll tell you one thing—it’s a whole lot better than ‘round here. The country just ain’t a good place for Coloreds—it’s too close to slave days. Up North Colored is workin’ in factories in the day and goin’ to school at night, tryin’ to get a trade or get educated. There’s plenty of Coloreds up there who write books, sing opera, or do most anything they want. It’s whole streets and neighborhoods full of nothing but Coloreds, who is always greetin’ to each other!”

“Coloreds folks smile and speak in the country!” Betty refuted, her back to the table, as she stood at the sink washing pots.

“I know, Mama, but it’s different—you’d have to go there to understand.”

“What ‘bout the white folks?” Helen asked.

Hazel Belle swallowed and sipped again before she began. “Well, believe it or not, white folks is a whole lot nicer up North. Sho’ nuff, you got crackers, but overall, they treat Coloreds like anybody else, not second class citizens.”

“Really?” Helen’s eyes widened with a mix of incredulity and optimism.

“Well,” said Hazel Belle, “I ain’t heard the word ‘nigger’ yet... they call us Coloreds’ like they supposed to!”

“Now, look-a-here,” Betty, insulted by the conversation she perceived as a lack of interest in her food, had turned to face her family, “it’s too much talkin’ and not enough eatin’ goin’ on at this here table!”

Betty’s word, as always, rang as a bell of finality under her own roof. Everyone became quietly engrossed in the effortless task of eating, especially Hazel Belle, who savored the familiarity of her mother’s cooking. Helen lifted the last bit of pie slowly to her mouth and chewed with a faraway look, envisioning a city full of friendly faces, bright lights, and honking motorcars. She noted Helen’s look of envy, and Hazel Belle straightened her back, mindful of her posture, eager to appear the picture of sophistication. After all, she was a woman of ambition, a woman who worked and went to night school in a place where Coloreds could be something other than white folks’ servant. The soft tap at the door interrupted their eating.

“Well, look who’s here. Your ears must was burnin’ ‘cause I was just talkin’ ‘bout you,” Betty announced with a beam of gladness pulling Sammy Nash in by the arm.

“Good evenin’, all.” Sammy tilted his hat to everyone at the table, while deliberately avoiding eye contact with Hazel Belle. He instead directed his conversation toward his crony, as Betty took his jacket and hat to hang them on the rack beside the door. “What you getting’ into this evenin’?” he asked Buck.

Buck smiled. Hazel Belle and Sammy both knew he was eager to embarrass them. “Man, ain’t no use in you actin’ like you come ‘round here to see me. There she is.” He pointed at his sister, who at once looked away. “Go on and talk to her if you want. Ain’t no need in y’all actin’ like strangers when we all know you ain’t!”

Sammy cleared his throat. “Hazel Belle,” he asked sheepishly, “you mind if I speak to you outside?”

She lifted herself gracefully from the table. “I reckon—I suppose—that would be okay.” Sitting side-by-side on the cozy wooden swing under a dusky sky, Sammy wasted no time in getting to the point. He reached over and caressed the softness of Hazel Belle’s hand. His touch sent moistness to her palms and a racing beat to her pulse. In response, she let out a nervous laugh. Sammy quickly scanned his zipper, which was securely fastened; then his shoes, both strings tied, so he wiped his nose, to be sure that nothing was hanging conspicuously from one of his nostrils. “What’s so funny?” he finally asked.

“Nothing—just thinking.”

“’Bout what?” He stopped rubbing her hand for a moment and then resumed.

Hazel Belle looked away, the temptation of revealing her secret thoughts tugging at her. Uncertain, she swayed her legs in and out to set swing in motion and sighed, but quickly drew in another breath, mustering courage. “’Bout how silly people act when they call themselves havin’ a ‘thing’ for each other.”

Sammy’s smile lit up the darkness that had beset upon evening. “You sayin’ you still got a ‘thing’ for me?”

Hazel Belle felt herself blush. “I ain’t sayin’ nothing, Sammy Nash, and don’t be puttin’ words in my mouth. Anyway,” she continued, “I got better things to do with my time than worry ‘bout love. It don’t do nothing but cause a bunch of unnecessary heartache—women bendin’ down to men that give ‘em no thanks. That’s why I ain’t bendin’ down to nobody but the good Lord.”

“Good Lord can’t give you what a flesh and blood man can.”

“He give me peace of mind and can’t no man seem to give me that.”

Sammy frowned, wondering if there had been others in her life after him. “I can give you that,” he challenged.

Hazel Belle looked over at Sammy, a plain and simple man, who slaved away his days working on a white man’s field, a man who would never take the time to enjoy a good book, visit a museum, or read poetry, a man who still stirred feelings in her she didn’t like to admit existed. Sammy paused. “I still love you, Hazel Belle.” The urgency in his voice sounded like a marriage proposal. But Hazel Belle was not sure so she sat quietly, waiting to hear more, fondly remembering the embrace of their last goodbye and his pleas for her not to leave.

It was nearly a year ago to the day when they had walked hand-in-hand down the hill. Hazel Belle shivered from the cool night breeze that swayed autumn leaves, and she shivered too from the touch of Sammy’s large fingers clasped tightly around hers. Beyond Betty’s house, in the darkness, they had stepped gingerly over sharp sticks and scattered rocks to a place near the river, covered by the denseness of tall trees, but still close enough to allow them an intimate view of the water. Hazel Belle pulled the quilt from the burlap bag she had toted on her shoulder. She spread it on a smooth spot and sat down, her knees lifted to her chest, her hands clasping her ankles. Sammy stood a moment before kneeling beside her. With lanky awkwardness he stretched out his long legs and pulled her close, laying his head on her.

“What you thinking, baby?”

“‘Bout a lot of stuff.”

“‘Bout leavin’ me, your Mama, and Buck.” He was telling her her thoughts.

“‘Bout leavin’ and ‘bout goin’.”

“Baby, I don’t see why you just cain’t stay here. You ain’t got to work in nobody’s kitchen. In fact,” he grabbed both her hands and held them, “you ain’t got to work at all. I’ll take care of you.”

“That ain’t what I want, Sammy.” She released her hands and looked away. “—to be taken care of. I want to take care of myself.”

“I don’t understand.” He picked up a small stray stick and threw it into the darkness.

“I know you don’t and I don’t expect you to, but it’s something’ I gotta do. Besides, my sisters is up there; I won’t be alone.”

“But what about Miss Betty? It’ll break her heart if you leave. You the last one of her girls still at home with her.”

“She got Buck—her pride and joy. She’ll be alright, just like she was alright after Beanie and Mary left.”

He grabbed her neck with a sudden passion and forced his lips upon hers, holding her so tightly she thought her ribs would crack. “Sammy, let go, you’re hurting me.”

He buried his head in the fullness of her hair and muttered, “No, you’re hurtin’ me. I ain’t gon’ let you go, Hazel Belle.” He squeezed her again and she let out a whimper, overcome by physical discomfort and emotional confusion.

Her tore at her blouse, cupped her breast and then reached lower. On prior occasions she had sternly halted all his sexual advances, so, out of habit, she opened her mouth to protest but found no words. She stared up at the stars as he laid her down, unbuckled his pants, and took graciously what she had finally decided to give him. For Hazel Belle, she had submitted her body, but refused to relinquish her strong will. When they had finished their lovemaking and she was buttoning her blouse, she stared stoically at him. “I’m goin’, Sammy.”

He said nothing more, only walked her home to safety and turned to leave in silence. She had said nothing, either, just stood at the doorway crying tears to endure the pain, a pain that continued to haunt her quiet moments of solitude when the city's busy streets emptied and the light posts dimmed.

When she pulled herself from thoughts of the past, she hoped that she spoke louder than the pounding of her heart. "I don't know how you can still say that, Sammy—after all this time. I been gone nearly a year. I been out in the world and I ain't the same girl I was when I left here."

"You the same to me—in fact, you even purdier than you was when you left."

Hazel Belle shook her head. "I ain't talkin' about looks. I'm talkin' about the person I am underneath. I've changed. I ain't no simple country girl, looking to get hitched and have a house full of babies."

As Hazel Belle spoke, she heard the clanking of dishes nearby, and she realized her mother, who had been inside clearing dishes, had eavesdropped.

Sammy peered at Hazel Belle, this strange woman with big ideas, and he realized that the notion he had secretly held onto was no more than a fantasy. He got up without speaking and reached inside the front door to retrieve his hat and jacket. Securely patting the hat onto his head and swinging the jacket in his arm, he nodded Hazel Belle goodnight.

"You leavin'?" she asked softly.

He stood before her—a tall figure—his expression hidden by the night; his voice revealed all that the darkness concealed. "Reckon so. Ain't no need of me hangin' 'round here, hopin' for something' ain't gon' never be."

Hazel Belle did not protest. She sat and watched him stride into the darkness to his horse and wagon. Hear the whinnying of his horse, she felt a lump rise in her throat. When the sounds

had completely disappeared, when she was sure Sammy Nash was long gone down the road and long gone out her life, she sighed heavily, for she didn't know what else to do.

The next morning, Hazel Belle, who had slept upstairs with Betty and shifted restlessly beneath the covers the entire night, stretched up her arms and succumbed to a wide and lazy yawn. Partly awake, she heard her mother rise at the crack of dawn to venture down creaking stairs to the back yard, where she greeted and set down a bucket of scraps for Flapjack and shooed clucking hens to gather eggs from moist nests. She had listened to Betty's familiar humming and the clamor of pots and the sizzle of sausage, which jarred pleasant memories of leisurely country mornings, of savory food and small talk. Lost in the nostalgia of her girlhood days, she heard Helen utter a whisper of her name. She lifted herself from the warmth of thick handmade quilts, tiptoed her bare feet over the wood floorboards to the top of the stairs, and tilted her head toward the voices.

Betty was responding to Helen's comment. "Well, she need to stop being so uppity and come on back here and make herself a home with Sammy Nash. She ain't getting' no younger and he ain't doing nothin' but sewin' his wild oats with that yella tramp!"

"Now, Miss Betty," Helen protested, "it ain't nobody's place to tell Hazel Belle what's good for her; she woman enough to make them choices for herself."

"Well," Betty had begun her rebuttal, but Hazel Belle didn't wait to hear it. She was gingerly creeping back over the floorboards to the corner in her mother's boudoir where her suitcase lay. She quickly trifled through it and pulled out a floral dress, one that she had packed to wear home. Home, she realized, was not here, in the familiar dwelling in which she had spent most of her days, but in the fast-paced city.

Fully dressed and trudging downstairs with her bags, she set them at the front door and entered the kitchen with a solemn look. Betty had watched her from the doorway and greeted her with a puzzled expression. “What you doing with that suitcase, gal?”

“I’m leavin’, Mama,” she responded dryly, “because I got some important business to attend to.”

“What kind of business you go to tend to that’s so important it slipped your mind till now?”

“It’s private.”

Betty raised her brow, put her hand on her hip, and searched her daughter’s face with an intimidating eye. Hazel Belle, no longer the passive girl dominated by her overbearing mother, stared back with a blank expression. “There’s a 2:30 train leavin’ today and if Buck can get me there, I’m gonna take that one.”

“If Buck’ll take you where to meet what?” Her brother, who had been out feeding the hogs, had come in for breakfast.

She looked at him. “I said I want to catch the 2:30 train today.”

He scratched his knotted head. “I thought you was stayin’ till Sunday. What’s the hurry?”

“Got things I need to take care of.” She turned away to camouflage her hurt over Sammy, Betty, and her visit that had gone so wrong.

Buck was standing by the basin and wiping his hands. “Stuff ain’t go good with you and Sammy?”

Hazel Belle sat at the table, twiddling her fingers. “That ain’t got nothin’ to do with it.”

He took the plate that his mother had prepared and sat directly in front of her. “You don’t feel like you fit in ‘round here no more?”

“Mind your business, Buck,” she responded, “and let me mind mine.” Though she looked at Buck, her statement had been intended for all those who surrounded her.

“I know you gone to the city and got high-minded,” Betty said, “but around here in the lowly country, we speaks to each wit’ a lil’ more respect!”

Hazel Belle felt her anger rise. “Mama, just because I don’t do what you want me to do don’t mean I don’t respect you. Respectin’ and bowin’ down is two different things. I am grown and I ain’t got to bow down to you or nobody!”

Betty quickly made her way over to Hazel Belle to deliver a firm slap across her daughter’s face. Hazel Belle touched the sting; her eyes misted, but her voice remained steady.

“Mama, what exactly does respect mean in these parts? The white man has taught us that it means do what you are told to do, and that’s how we live outside of our homes and even within ‘em. Well, that is not what respect means. It means doing what you know is right, even when the world, even your own Mama, thinks you are wrong!”

“I knew that going away would make you come back here and look down your nose at me.” Betty now spoke calmly. She turned away from her daughter and busied herself at the sink.

“Hazel Belle,” Helen said, “you don’t think low of us now, do you?”

“Of course not.”

Helen continued, in spite of the awkwardness, and directed her comment not only to Hazel Belle, but to everyone in the kitchen. “I mean, we all do serve the white folk—me, your Mama, Buck—and what good do it do us at the end of the day?”

“We can eat, and we got a roof over our head, don’t we”? Betty responded, still with her back turned. “You see your brother got hisself a motorcar.”

Buck rubbed his hands over his overalls and rocked back and forth. “Don’t nothing happen for a Colored ‘less the white man breathe life into it.”

When Buck honked the horn in front of the house at two o’clock, it was only Helen who bid Hazel Belle farewell. She smiled at her sister-in-law and extended a gracious hug. Betty, in obstinacy, stood at the doorway, wiping her apron, eyeing them.

Hazel Belle did not really know why she had come home. Perhaps to find comfort in the familiarity of the past when her future seemed so uncertain. Deep down, despite all of her hopeful talk, she was doubtful that any change could come to an uppity Colored, in the city or the country, who dared to step out on a limb.

Chapter Eight

“Lord, dear Lord, let me lay my burdens down on you,” Helen muttered, as she peered over at Mary Agnes. She absorbed a long look at her before reluctantly shifting her gaze back to the dingy back door of Miss Anne’s capacious domain. Securing the small basket that cushioned her baby in her left arm, she stepped with caution out of her horse and wagon and trudged the familiar dirt path to the mansion. “Heaven knows what she gon’ say about you,” Helen whispered to Mary Agnes, as she placed the basket on the kitchen table. She envisioned Miss Anne’s icy stare scrutinizing her beautiful baby and then warning Helen that if she proved to be a nuisance of any sort, her services would be terminated immediately. “Now, wouldn’t that be a blessin’,” she muttered to herself, clasping one of the baby’s delicate fingers and wiggling it.

“Wouldn’t vhat be a blessing?”

“Nothing,” Helen responded quickly. The sharp voice never ceased to startle her.

During a brief but awkward pause, Miss Anne bestowed an empty gaze on the newborn. In a nervous stutter, Helen began explaining. “This here is my lil’ baby. She named Mary Agnes. I had to bring her wit’ me today. I won’t be bringin’ her every day; some days she gon’ go wit’ her gramma.” She looked to Miss Anne for some sort of response and braced herself for disapproval. “She ain’t much trouble at all.” She fixed her stare on the floor and waited.

“Vell, I hope this will not deter you from your duties. I cannot tolerate noisy vailing.”

“No, Miss Anne, most times she’s quiet as a lil’ mouse, only whimper when she hungry or need her diaper changed.”

“I certainly hope zhat vill not be the case because if zhis causes any problems, I vill have to find someone else.”

“Yes’m,” she replied.

“Now,” Miss Anne ordered in a crisp tone, “I vould like the linens washed and hung, fresh fruit boiled and canned, and my breakf—” She was interrupted by a sharp knock at the front door. A frown creased her narrow forehead. “Who could zhat be?” She looked to Helen.

“Answer it.”

Obediently, Helen scurried down the corridor to the front door. In a cautious effort to view the unexpected guest, she cracked the door open, just enough to squint through a glare of sunlight at the familiar countenance of Mister Pritchard, the owner of the small general store across the road. She watched a hearty smile stretch his taut, yet pleasant face.

“Howdy there, Helen. How you feelin’?”

“Fine, sir.” Helen returned his smile, stepped aside and motioned him into the foyer. “I’ll tell Miss Anne you’re here.”

He took off his black hat, politely smiled again, and stepped in. “Much obliged.” Helen hurried back to the kitchen. “It’s Mista Pritchard,” she announced. Watching Miss Anne’s narrow backside as she exited the kitchen, Helen picked up Mary Agnes, rocked her gently, and extended a curious ear in the direction of the parlor. Their voices traveled the echoing walls, so that Helen easily discerned their words.

“Why, hello, Miss Sutherland. How are you?”

“Just fine.”

“Good-good. My sincere sympathy to you for the loss of your husband. He was a fine, fine man, a pillar of the community.”

“Tank you.”

An awkward pause followed. Mister Pritchard cleared his throat. “I reckon you’re wondering what brings me unannounced to your home and so early in the morning at that. “He wiped at the beads of sweat that erupted on his brow. “I suppose you’ve heard about the grand opening of our store since we’ve done all the remodeling and renovating.”

“Yes.”

“Well, the one thing we seemed to have overlooked was parkin’ space. With all the new motorcars folks are buying, we’re gonna have to clear away bushes on the side of the store to make room.

“I suppose so,” Miss Anne answered dryly.

“I got some local boys who can get started on it first thing next week, but, meanwhile, I was wondering if you’d be so kind to allow customers to park on your lot—if the need arises. Predicting Miss Anne’s reaction, Helen’s eyes widened. She rocked Mary Agnes harder.

“You may certainly not use my land!”

Helen heard Mister Pritchard clear his throat before he uttered, “Perhaps, this will change your mind...”

Hearing the abrupt slam of the front door and Miss Anne’s angry footsteps marching back down the corridor, Helen quickly nestled Mary Agnes back in the basket and busied herself preparing breakfast.

“Vhat the devil does he tink? That he can bribe me with a pittance—that my property is up for public use?” Miss Anne was talking to herself but she expected Helen to offer agreement.

“I declare,” Helen responded, still appearing busy, slicing slabs of bacon.

“The nerve!” Miss Anne strutted out of the room. She reentered. “My property!” she exclaimed before storming out again.

“My breakfast!” she snarled from the corridor. Upon entering the dining room, Miss Anne took a seat at the long thick mahogany table and waited with mounting impatience. Her chair, adjacent to Mister John’s, which headed the table, allowed her direct view of a huge oil painting of her deceased husband, one that portrayed him in life-like, eerie exactness. For a fleeting moment, as Helen stood at the doorway and looked in at Miss Anne sitting alone at the table and Lil’ Kitty, her only companion, curled in the corner, she felt sympathy for her.

“Vhat are you standing there looking at?”

Helen, who held the pitcher in her hand, quickly poured her a glass of fresh apple cider, inadvertently spilling some onto the white tablecloth.

“Look at vhat you’ve done—you’ve stained my mother’s best linen!” She pushed herself away from the table in disgust.

“Sorry, Miss Anne.” Helen lifted the corner of her apron and wiped the spot, which had left a light stain.

“I vant you to vash, dry, and iron zhis tablecloth before you leave today.”

“Yes’m.” Helen scurried back to the kitchen and carefully placed Miss Anne’s breakfast on a small wooden tray. She briskly carried it in to her and served with strained politeness. She then took her place at the door, her hands folded, waiting for another command. When Miss Anne took a small bit of toast and Lil’ Kitty began lapping milk contentedly from her dish, she left to begin her household chores.

The morning dragged in its usual monotony, though Miss Anne’s demeanor, now more irritable and profusely rude, filled Helen’s own sprit with a peculiar mixture of tension and

melancholy. Unable to fully concentrate on her work, for fear of one of Miss Anne's outbursts, she kept a watchful eye on the doorway as she moved about.

Several hours passed and Helen, washing and peeling a bushel of peaches, realized her nervous vigilance was unnecessary, for Miss Anne's preoccupation with Mister Pritchard's request diverted her attentions away from Helen and kept her stationed in the front wing of the house, where she invented light tasks in the parlor, such as rearranging flowers in crystal vases, fluffing embroidered pillows or idly reading by the window that allowed her full view of the goings-on across the field. Her anger surmounted as she witnessed horse, buggy, and motorcar fill Pritchard's lot, foot by foot, until not a single inch remained. "That foolish man had better obey me!" she huffed indignantly. "I said 'no parking' and zhat's what I mean!"

By this time, Helen, on bended knees and with scrub brush in hand, was waxing her way down the corridor, all the while keeping a nervous eye on Miss Anne, who paced about erratically, flinging her arms and mumbling curses. She quickly inched out of the way as the frail woman in her preoccupation tracked shoe marks over the freshly wiped floor. She headed straight to Mister John's mahogany and glass gun rack, which contained her late husband's wide assortment of rifles and revolvers.

Helen's heart thumped fiercely beneath her gingham dress. Still kneeling, her scrubbing ceased and her mouth dropped. She closed it to swallow hard; Miss Anne had yanked one of the guns down and was fumbling with the trigger.

"Why, Miss Anne, what you think you do—"Before she could utter her incredulity, Miss Anne had once again stormed past her, with the pistol, as long and narrow as she, held tightly in her grasp. Fear stifled Helen, but only for a moment as she quickly leaped up and ran after her mistress, who now stood peering out the window. Miss Anne stomped her foot in fury as one

motorcar and then another had begun parking on her lot. “Damn you!” she yelled, marching over to the double doors and jerking them open by brass knobs. “Get the hell off my land!”

“Miss Anne, get a hold of yourself!” Helen pleaded. Wide-eyed, she stood behind her and peered out the open door. The people ahead appeared as colored dots and were well out of hearing distance. She gasped as Miss Anne lifted the gun. “You hear me!” she hollered. “Not on my land!” She then cocked the handgun, and, in one hasty movement, pulled the trigger, aiming it not at the distant crowd, as Helen expected, but at herself.

“No, Miss Anne!” Helen shouted, dropping to the ground, away from danger. She closed her eyes and placed her hands over her ears to block out the explosive clamor.

When the noise ceased, Helen reluctantly opened her eyes. Witnessing the horrific sight, she let out a resonant wail. Miss Anne’s frail frame lay sprawled out, her face a mass of blood and flesh. Above her disfigured face lay a clump of brain organ. To her side just out of reach of her still-trembling fingers lay the pistol.

“Miss Anne!” Helen screamed. “No!” She shook her head in a stupor of hysteria. What she saw compelled her to run to the edge of the porch and release a river of vomit. Unable to turn back, she ran across the field in frenzied steps, she tripped and fell, face first, in the weeded field. Struggling to lift her head up, she peered ahead; the store still seemed miles away, but another motorcar had turned onto Miss Anne’s land. She began to run again, this time faster. “Sir! Please help me!” The man ahead, just getting out of his motorcar, stopped and turned in Helen’s direction. He waited. Panting and huffing, Helen struggled to reach him. When she did, she was too out of breath to speak. She stood before him panting. “Come—please--”

“Now, now, calm down, Missy.” He stood staring at Helen, concern crinkling his forehead. “What’s the matter?”

Helen inhaled deeply and caught enough wind to continue. “Sir, something awful done happened, just awful!” She wiped at tears and sweat that streamed down her round cheeks.

“What is it?” His patience was thinning, and curiosity overcame concern.

“Miss Anne—she dead—done shot herself. Was acting fool ‘bout folks on her land and then turned the gun on herself! Can’t make sense o’ none of this!”

“Lordy!” he shouted. “Come on, gal!” He hopped back into his motorcar and motioned for Helen to do the same. Together they trailed over the bumpy field to the front of the mansion. Braking abruptly both jumped out in haste. Helen, knowing the sight that lay ahead, lingered. “Well, what you waiting on?” He had stopped and was waiting for her.

In the confusion, Helen had forgotten Mary Agnes. She leaped out and rushed up the steps, past the corpse of Miss Anne, and through the house to retrieve her baby, who was wailing loudly in the kitchen. “Thank God,” she said, swooping up her baby and cuddling her close to her face. Holding Mary Agnes, Helen reluctantly headed to the front porch.

“Dear Lord!” the gentleman said, over and over again, as he stared down at the horror. He lifted his sleeve to cover his nose and mouth and to suppress his urge to regurgitate. “I’ll go back for help, but it don’t look like Miss Sutherland can use it.”

Helen stood silent and nodded. She bounced her baby to rock and comfort her. “I reckon you oughta come.”

Compliantly, she trailed behind the kind gentleman and once again seated herself in his compact vehicle. As he cranked, he let out an exasperated sigh. “What the devil happened, gal?”

“She went and got Mister John’s gun to stop people from parkin’ on her lot. I seen Miss Anne pointin’ the gun at her own head, and fear froze me. I closed my eyes—couldn’t bear to look. When I opened ’em, I found Miss Anne dead to the world!”

“My word!”

As they neared Pritchard’s store, Helen tried her best to regain a bit of composure to face the questions that she knew awaited her. She sat in the car, twisting her palms nervously, as the young man leaped out and ran in the store. Moments later, a rustle of commotion and talk erupted. Masses of people rushed out, some whispering, some yelling, all headed, on foot, by buggy, or motorcar, to the Sutherlands. Tears streamed down her cheeks and along the corners of her mouth. She opened the creaking door and stepped out of it to face the inevitable.

Mounting the porch, Helen gasped, for there was Lil’ Kitty, perched loyally beside her master, tenderly licking pieces of scattered brain. Sickened, she closed her eyes and shuffled away. To avoid the mass of people that enveloped the porch, Helen slipped out of sight, around the porch, and down the familiar dirt path to the back door. Once inside, she gazed at the breakfast dishes, scraped, and set aside by the aluminum sink to be washed. She shook her head, pondering the strange turn of events, and Miss Anne’s violent demise. She placed Mary Agnes in the wicker basket, wiped the tears and sweat from her forehead and cheeks and patted down her wrinkled frock. She had shed tears earlier, not out of grief, but out of sheer hysteria. Now, alone in the empty house, devoid of Miss Anne’s shrill, commanding voice, oddly, she felt a deep loneliness. Weeping silently, she plopped lifelessly onto a nearby chair and buried her head in her open palms.

“What exactly happened here?” She looked up and brushed at her tears. It was Tom Fisher, the local sheriff. He placed one hand on his satchel and with the other, he patted his belly that bulged over his brass belt buckle.

Helen swallowed hard at having to repeat the story once more. “Well, after Mister Pritchard come by and ask her ‘bout usin’ her lot, Miss Ane went mad, cussin’ and stompin’

round here. Then when she seen motorcars parkin' on her land anyway, in spite of what she say, she run and got Mista John's gun to shoot and then she shot her ownself!"

"Why would she do that? Why would a woman like Miss Anne, clothed in her right mind, take a gun and turn it on herself."

Helen looked at him earnestly. "Sir, I don't rightly know. But I know her husband, Mister John, recently died. I reckon she didn't feel she had nothing left to live for. She won't be the type to be weeping, but I guess the loss took its toll."

"Is that so?" He rubbed under his chin, processing Helen's theory. "Well, if it's one thing I learned about women, it's that they are unpredictable. Never can tell what they'll do next." He sighed. "I'll need to take a look around the house and being that the Sutherlands ain't got no family close by, I got to secure the place."

Helen grabbed the handle of the basket where Mary Agnes lay. She waited to be dismissed but dared not make a move to do so.

"I guess you can be on your way now, gal." He scratched his bald shiny head and frowned at her. "But don't stray too far, case anything comes up or I find a hole in your story."

"Yessah." With baby in arms, Helen walked, one final time, through the Sutherland mansion. As she opened the front door, she looked down the long corridor and sorrowfully turned to the front porch where a gathering of onlookers still whispered and stared. She made her way off the porch, now wiped clean of Miss Anne's gory remains, and with a dazed look, she made her way to the horse and wagon.

Helen hurried, hieing horse, lashing it, goading it, until she reached the half-circle in front of Miss Nettie's. She yelled for mother-in-law. In desperate need of Betty's consoling wisdom to make sense of yet another tragedy, she yelled again. Moments later, she spotted Betty at the

door and watched her shuffle toward her, her pocketbook and a bag of baked goods swaying from her wrist. “Now, what’s done got into you?” she asked, struggling to position herself comfortably on the compact seat.

Helen shook the reins to get the horse moving. “Miss Betty,” she absorbed a deep breath. There was so much to tell, she didn’t know where to begin, so she started at the end. “Miss Anne dead! Shot herself in the head!”

“Chile, you tellin’ a tale!”

Helen shook her head. “No, I ain’t, either!” She went on to repeat the story once more. “Lord hammercyy!” Betty declared. In the same breath, she grabbed Mary Agnes from the basket and held her face close to hers. “The Lord giveth life and he taketh away, but this here lil’ life bringing the best kind of joy in the whole world. I don’t know what I would do without her! She take the place of all my girls that left me!”

“She’s dead, Miss Betty!” Helen shouted, confused by her mother-in-law’s nonchalance. “They sent two men to scrape her brains off the porch!”

“Well, Betty responded in the same even tone. “So you ain’t got to worry yourself ‘bout what you promised Mista John. Cain’t nobody look after Miss Anne now but the good Lord... if that’s where she headed! Now, get some speed to this buggy! I’m tired and I got to get supper on for Buck!”

One thing was for sure, Helen thought, as she gassed the pedal with more force—with Miss Anne dead, she no longer had a job. Where would she find another one?

“So,” Betty said, as though reading Helen’s thoughts, “to take your burden, he had to take away your job. The Lord work in mysterious ways—don’t ever question his doing! You’ll find work—maybe sooner than you think!”

Journeying down the dusty road Helen squinted from the blaring sun, which made her vision of three figures ahead at first indecipherable.

Miss Betty switched attention from her grandbaby. “What is that?”

Helen strained to see. “Look like three white fellas on horses.” As they approached them, she pulled on the reins and reluctantly halted. One of the men she recognized as Old Man Stinell’s youngest son. He guided his horse to her and bent down to peer at her.

“Can I help you, sir?” she asked, a mixture of timidity and fear lowering her voice to a whisper.

“You Buck Carrington’s wench, ain’t ya?”

“I’m his wife.”

“Where bouts is your husband?”

“I-I don’t know, sir. I ain’t seen him since this mornin’.”

Betty peered over at the young man without intimidation. “What you askin’ where my son is for?”

He smiled emptily. “Got a lil’ business to finish, that’s all, auntie.” Before continuing, he glanced over at the two men. “Ain’t nothing to worry your head about. When you see him, tell him the Stinells is looking for him.” He then tapped his horse and nodded his head to the two gentlemen. “Let’s go fellas.”

Helen and Betty sat, dumfounded and confused.

“What business?” Betty murmured. Helen, in silence, drove on, staring blankly, as the three men disappeared into the blinding haze of sun.

Chapter Nine

Around the same time that the tragedy was unfolding at the Sutherlands, the sun beamed down on Buck's bare back in a sweltering haze of heat that scorched his skin. In the wide-acred field Sammy had stopped alongside him, pulling cotton and hacking weeds in perfunctory swipes and lifts.

"I swanny, I could sure use a cold beer right now," Sammy said, pausing and wiping sweat from his brow. "What you say 'bout you and me swinging by the juke joint after this?"

"Can't. I promised Helen I'd be home early."

Sammy shrugged his shoulders without protest, stooped again and then resumed work. He adjusted the strap of the cotton sack that bore into his shoulder. He bent over, plucked cotton blossoms, tossed them into the cotton sack and repeated the process, slowly making his way down mile-long rows. The silence between them persisted, as each man concentrated on finishing a long day in the fields. Mischief consuming

Sammy in his boredom, he attempted a casual tone. "So, you seen Lady Bug lately?" Peripherally, he caught Buck's surprised look that quickly shifted back to blandness.

Keeping focused, Buck raised his brow without looking up. "Nah, I ain't seen her. What I got to see her for?" he added.

"For what you used to see her for, I reckon," Sammy said, glancing sideways at him, still hoeing.

“Everything I need from a woman I gets it from my wife.” Buck was sure of himself.

Sammy shrugged. “Hey, that’s fine by me. If a man wanna stay faithful to his wife, I got to respect that. Besides, I think Helen is a good woman.” He glanced at Buck again. “So I guess you wouldn’t care to know what Lady But keep telling Minnie, who keep telling me to tell you...” He paused, testing Buck’s resistance.

Buck gave in to temptation, or possible just plain old curiosity. “Tell me what?” He stopped a moment.

Sammy smiled devilishly. “To tell you she ‘bout to ‘go fool missing that ole black scoundrel.” He squeaked his manly voice to mimic Lady Bug’s high-pitched whine.

Buck couldn’t resist the grin that widened his face. For a fleeting moment, the image of Lady Bug’s soft pale face and her delicate smile aroused a flame in him. Yet the following thought—one of Helen and Mary Agnes—quickly extinguished it. He paused to caress a callous on his hand.

“You ain’t getting tired, is you?” Sammy teased. “We still got ‘bout a hours more work here.”

“Nah,” Buck lied, “let’s just get a move on it.”

“Fool, you the one runnin’ your mouth!”

“Now, I know you ain’t...” The sound of hoofs, quick and loud, had interrupted Buck’s cajoling. Junior Stinell, riding a shiny black mare, stopped only a moment short of trampling over Buck. Perched high, he squinted down at the two men. His angular jaws were swollen with tobacco. Trickle of sweat dammed on the crown of his forehead before streaming down his blonde hairline. Poking his lips forward, he aimed for the tip of Buck’s dusty shoe and spat with precision. A wad of brown, clumpy saliva slid off the side of it.

“I see you boys ain’t been doing nothing but a bunch o’ yacking!” Buck stood, wiping his shoe on dirt, his wide nostrils flaring, his right fist slowly clenching.

“Now, ho—hold on,” Sammy stuttered. “Me and Buck been working hard all day.” Junior kept his stare fixed on Buck, who lifted his eyes to meet the glare of his oppressor. They stared in contempt. “Buncha lazy, good-for-nothing niggers—think you gonna get your pay for just showing up to work. We don’t take kindly to handouts around here!”

Buck edged forward. Sammy grabbed his elbow. Sammy briefly glanced up at Junior before he began. “We ain’t no beggars. We done worked hard, done earned our pay—every penny.”

“Boy, who you think you smart-mouthing?” he badgered. His stare switched to Sammy, who backed down and peered across the field at tall weeds.

“That goes for you, too,” he taunted Buck, whose endurance had flared into rage.

Buck gritted his teeth and spoke with an equal loathing. He was tired of cow-towing, tired of begging, tired of giving all of his respect to white folk and having none left over for himself. “Don’t shit go for me. And ain’t nobody out here a boy—at least not me or Sammy.” Starting at Junior’s blotchy face, his temple pulsed.

“Why, you big and bad, now ain’t you, boy—since you done gone and got yourself a motorcar, you think you good as any white man. Well, let’s see how you make them payments now, now that your lazy, lousy, loud-mouthed nigger ass is fired!”

Without thought, Buck reached for Junior, grabbing his leg and yanking him from his pedestal. Fisting his collar with his left hand, he centered Junior’s face with his right and stopped short of crashing his fist into it. He threw Junior back, pushing him violently to the ground. Junior shook

his head to regain his senses. Buck stood over him. Sammy's knees trembled in fear, as Junior rose to meet Buck eye-to-eye.

"You 'bout to become a dead nigger! Get off my land!"

Buck hardly remembered what had just occurred. The sun blinded him. Was he dreaming? He tried to gather his wits.

Junior edged closer, his keen nose touching the flatness of Buck's. "Did you hear me? I said, 'Get the hell off my property, nigger!'"

Sammy, who had stood dumbfounded, absorbed in incredulity, grabbed Buck by the arm and began pulling him. Let's get outta here, man!" Buck snatched away and Sammy ran over to plead with Junior. "Sir, he ain't mean it. He just lost his head is all."

Junior spoke, his words muffled, yet matter-of-fact. "He's gonna lose a lot more than just his head."

Sammy ran over to Buck, who, in large strides, was making his way across the field to Sammy's wagon. As quickly as he could, Sammy unhitched the horse from the post, hopped onto the rusty seat, motioned for Buck to join him, and the two men left a trail of dust, separating them from harm's reach. "Man, what possessed you to do such a damn fool thing?"

Buck sat in silence, worry creasing his forehead, pride concealing his fear. "Man, I don't give a shit. I ain't get half of what he deserved! I shoulda knocked his ass out."

"Well, it ain't never up to no Colored man to give a cracker what he deserve!"

Buck was not listening to Sammy's reasoning. He was thinking of Helen, whom he could not face, who would not convey the depth of her disappointment, and of his mother, who would. Suddenly, Cooke's seemed more appealing than ever.

“Take me by the house, so I can get my motorcar. Mama and Helen shouldn’t be home yet.”

Sammy said nothing, only nodded.

When they approached the top of the hill, Buck let out a sigh of relief, for he saw no trace of the horse and buggy. “Be right back,” he said, hopping out. Shortly after, he returned in clean trousers, and with his shirt and another pair of breeches dangling from his arm.

“Let’s go,” he commanded, sliding one arm and then the other into his shirt. As he and Sammy hopped into his car, Buck slapped cologne on his neck and handed the bottle to Sammy to do the same. “I brought you a pair of clean trousers.” He tossed the breeches over to Sammy. The rest of the way, in between keeping the car on the road, he combed, slicked, and patted his hair into place and said nothing.

Both men entered Cooke’s decked in baggy breeches and spit-shined shoes and trailing a scent of smell-good. Hands thrust in pockets, they strutted through the smoke and the music, superficial smiles camouflaging Sammy’s despair and Buck’s fear. Buck ran his hand over his hair and Sammy smoothed down his mustache. They stopped at several tables to greet and shake hands with their cronies. As he spoke, Buck’s eyes discreetly shifted and squinted; he scanned the place with feigned indifference. The sight of Lady Bug, twisting in bar stool across the room and engaged in priggish giggling with Minnie, satisfied him. Not wanting to seem anxious, he tarried a while longer, his peripheral vision capturing a glimpse of her bright smile and bountiful cleavage. As he approached the bar, she turned her head from him. “Here he come,” he heard her whisper. Then she turned her head, speaking loudly enough for Buck to eavesdrop.

“That ole black rascal,” she said. “He ain’t worth two cents. I don’t care nothing about him. I don’t care if I never see him again.”

Lady Bug, as she did now, had always initiated the cat and mouse game. Though hardly a challenge, Buck found it cutesy, so he played along. He tiptoed behind her and breathed on her neck.

“Give me a beer, Sam,” he ordered Mister Cooke, tossing a crumpled bill on the counter and still standing directly behind her. “Can I get something’ for the purdy lady?” he asked, turning her by the shoulder to face him.

“Well, look what the cat drug in.” With a raised brow and full of attitude, she scanned him from head to toe.

In response, he gawked at her figure with a slow, heavy eye. “Damn girl, you get purdier every time I see you.”

“Been so long, I’m surprised you ‘memba what I look like.”

“I couldn’t forget your face.” He touched her softly on her chin.

“You sure act like you ain’t thinking nothing about me.” She was turning away.

“Now, come on sugar,” he sweet-talked, pulling her back to him, flashing his even white teeth. “Don’t be like that.” He nudged her cheek with his forefinger before digging in his pocket and pulling out a small bottle of toilet water with a ribbon tied around it. Having brought it with the intentions of giving it to his wife, he had grabbed it quickly from a hiding place in the armoire on his way back to his car. “Look-a-here what I got just for you,” he lied, holding it out to her, poking his lips and lowering his eyes to make a pitiful face.

She snatched the gift. “You make me sick, Buck Carrington.”

“Now, I wouldn’t want to do that. I only want to make you feel good.” He stared deeply into her hazel eyes. He began caressing her curvaceous waistline and now that she did nothing to protest, he knew he was making quick progress. It wasn’t long before she resumed her girlish

sniggles. Buck bent over to Sammy, who sat in goo-goo eyed huddle with Minnie. “Man, let me use your motorcar. Me and Lady Bug got a lil’ business to tend to.”

Sammy smiled, as he pulled the keys from his pocket and jingled them at Buck. “Easy now,” he said, winking.

Buck turned to Lady Bug. “Sugar, why don’t we take us a lil’ ride—get some air?” He gulped down the rest of his beer, eyeing her. Setting down the bottle, he reached for his last crumpled bill and smacked it on the table. Though Lady Bug protested; Buck grabbed her soft hand, and she compliantly followed him outside.

Once comfortably seated, Buck cranked the engine and pulled Lady Bug close to him. With one hand on the steering wheel and the other wrapped around her narrow shoulder, he turned out of the lot, journeyed a few miles, and ventured down a long, lonely side road. Turning the engine off, Buck sat silently, staring into the darkness, pondering and suddenly sullen. There was little sound, only the lulling of chirping crickets, and sparse light, only the bright stars and moon that shadowed Lady Bug’s neatly carved profile and Buck’s strong salient one. The dewy night air and the sweet aroma of her perfume did nothing to lessen the day’s burden. Examining his pensive expression, Lady Bug nestled closer to his broad chest. “Buck, what’s the matter? You ain’t acting yourself.”

He did not respond, only reached over and kissed her savagely, groping her, tugging at her sheer frock and parting her legs. With the same adamancy, she pulled at his damp shirt. The sweat on his bare black chest glistened in the moonlight. As they lay stretched out on the seat, he gazed in awe at Lady Bug’s pale, curvaceous body. In the darkness, she looked almost white. The contrast, his ebony and hers milky, intrigued him. He fondled and then gently caressed her. With sudden haste and urgency, he unzipped his trousers and positioned himself on top of her.

Fiercely indulged, he listened to the creaking springs and Lady Bug's moaning that soon reached a crescendo. As the comfort of her womanhood faded, he lifted himself and then plopped lifelessly alongside her. He sighed deeply, kissed her lightly on the forehead, and cuddled her against him. Exhausted and partially clothed, they dozed off, side by side.

Hours passed before Buck, feeling peculiar and somehow out of place, flashed open his eyes and sat up abruptly. Disoriented, he squinted down at Lady Bug, who, awakened by his movement, shifted lazily. The residue of their encounter, now lucidly recollected, flooded his conscience with self-loathing. He reached in his trousers for a cigarette and match, lit, and inhaled deeply. Lady Bug, who seemed to sense his turmoil, sat up and began putting on her garments.

"Buck, I can't take this second hand love from you no more..." She had begun her "this is the last time" speech, but Buck wasn't listening. He stared ahead and as light crept slowly upon morning, he drowned in visions and flashbacks....his proposal to Helen, the first time he laid eyes on Lady Bug, Mary Agnes' sweet face, the smug face of Junior Stinell, long tiresome workdays, his father's haggard stature, his mother's stern but loving expression... He closed his eyes tightly and shook his head to diminish them.

Though he wanted desperately to run home to his wife, he did not. Knowing that Sammy had long gone to be with Minnie, he cranked the engine and headed towards Lady Bug's small shack Up on the Ridge, where he could find a temporary haven.

Meanwhile, as Buck journeyed to the valley, Helen tossed and turned between crumpled sheets. She would drift into a restless slumber and periodically awaken from a startling

nightmare or the ghost of Buck, who would nudge her gently. She would nestle toward it in the darkness and throw her arm across the empty space beside her on the bed.

Finally, she arose, wiped the sleepiness from her reddened eyes and squinted at the small clock on the nightstand. She knew Buck was not coming home. Was he hurt? Was he hiding? Was he off again, with Lady Bug? These thoughts were so disturbing that Helen fisted her mouth to keep from crying out. What had he gone and done now? And why? When things had been going so well for them. She could not answer any of these questions. And she would not give Buck another chance to lie to her, to sweet talk her, to convince her that everything would be fine. She was sick with worry for his well-being and sick with an intuitive sense of betrayal, and she wasn't sure which sick would lead her to act. Should she stay another day and wait, to make certain he was okay? But what about her own safety? Perhaps the white folks would be looking for her soon, thinking she had lied about Miss Anne. Nothing good would come from this day. Finally, she would wait, she decided—wait for a chance to leave with Buck's motorcar. She had nothing to lose—no job, possibly no husband and definitely no future here.

Half-dazed, she lifted herself from the hard mattress, crept over to the tattered armoire and reached into the tiny compartment, her hiding place where she had stored away the meager contents of her pay, working for the Sutherlands. The jar was nearly full now—it would be enough to get her North, perhaps to Hazel Belle's or to her sister's place. She slid the jar back into its safe spot. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she stood now over the small wooden cradle where little Mary Agnes lay sleeping. She bent and gently kissed her on the mouth, absorbing a long stare at her daughter-- her hope, her motivation to show her what self-respect really meant. She got back into bed, and for the rest of the night, she lay awake, anxious and fearful, crying softly until sunlight emerged through the window.

When the morning sun rose in vibrancy, Buck, once again swaggering, his disheveled clothes reeking of liquor and smoke, entered his mother's home. He was greeted by her quiet mourning as she sat rocking in her usual chair in the parlor. This time she offered no grievances or reprimands. The sullen look on her face and her shifting eyes said it all.

Unnerved and silent, defeat crept over Buck. And though he wanted to, he could blame no one and nothing—not the racism of Junior Stinell, not the coaxing of Sammy Nash, not the light-bright skin of Lady Bug. He could blame only himself, and so, he acknowledged his guilt and accepted his fate, a fate that would most likely mean death.

He stood without bravado and addressed his situation and then his mother as best he could. "Mama, don't worry. No matter what happens now, even if I die today, I will die a man." He leaned against the doorway to the kitchen, crossed his legs and folded his arms. His mother flashed him a puzzled look. He continued. "I decided I won't gon' let the white man chip away at my self-respect no more. Walking 'round dead on the inside like my Daddy ain't no kind of life."

"What 'bout your wife's respect, son? What 'bout that? Least your Daddy still had his family. Don't that count for something?"

Buck admitted to himself, not to his mother, that he hadn't gotten that far in his thinking. He loved his wife, and God knows, he loved Mary Agnes, but he couldn't wallow in regret. He had to focus on the good—that he had acted, had grabbed a piece of dignity for himself. But, ultimately, he had lost.

A cheater in his marriage and a swindler in the game of life, Buck, for the first time, had to come to terms with losing. He had always considered himself a winner, but what did winning really mean? Now, it sure as hell seemed as if he had lost everything.

He gazed at his mother, not avoiding her stare, like he did as boy when he had done something wrong. He eyed her evenly because he felt he had done something right, as if he had won. He faced her and his circumstances as best he could. “Mama, you gon’ sit there all day or you gon’ fix me some breakfast?”

Chapter Ten

Helen had been driving for hours on end—over dirt roads that turned to main roads that turned to highways. Following signs and arrows. Witnessing dawn lift to day. Light. She could see more of it in the distance. But this was different. No morning sun creeping through the window, no kerosene or candles. Streets lined with buildings, a store on every corner, stoplights. And motorcars galore. Honking. People on the move. Helen pulled over and unfolded a crumpled piece of paper from her pocketbook--her sister's address: 432 Lexington Avenue, Apt. D.

The brown building was tall and brick. She entered a dark and a pungent hallway and dragged herself, with suitcases in tow, up two flights of stairs. She set down her bags, pressed down her hair and clothes, and knocked several times. As she waited, she had one pervasive thought: I don't know what's ahead. But I do know what I left behind, the bitter and the sweet. God, you done brought me to this point. I done made it this far. But the journey at hand has just begun. She tapped again.

Corrine pulled Helen in for a tight hug. They embraced like blood, like family. This here was Corrine's baby sister, all grown up and in need of the kind of support only a family member could give. A warm bed, a hot meal, a newspaper with jobs for Coloreds. She would help Helen get back on her feet, so she could start a life here in Harlem, instead of back in the boonies of Virginia with that lowlife, Buck Carrington.

She had told Helen, on the day she married him, that it was a mistake.

"I told you Buck didn't mean you no damn good," she said. She took Helen's coat, set her bags by the pull-out couch. In the small kitchen, she started breakfast.

"That black rascal was just plain worthless, all the time drinking and chasing women. A wedding ring can't change what's in a man. A lying fool turns into a cheating fool."

Helen had heard all this before. So she looked out the window for something new. Everything down below was new, at least to her. The streets were fully awake—some people stepped onto buses and into cars, some huddled in corners and puffed on cigarettes, and some strutted with newspapers tucked under their armpits.

"Go on in the bathroom and freshen up!" shouted Corrine over the clatter of pots and pans. "I got a towel and washcloth set on the commode."

Helen pulled herself from the view. It was too much to take in at once, anyway. In the bathroom she patted the damp cloth under her eyes, which stung from fatigue, and then studied the dingy walls. Back at Betty's, there was only a dark and stinky outhouse. If you needed a wash-up, you did so in your bedroom, with a bucket of water just heated on the wood stove, a hard rag, and a thick slice of lye soap. Here there was a sink with a faucet of instant hot and cold. Helen twisted each knob and splashed her face with warm water. She squinted at her

reflection. Where she had come from, there was no mirror right in front of you to primp, or creams and lipstick right at your fingertips. You had to run upstairs to the hazy looking glass over the bureau, where you couldn't halfway see yourself, anyhow. Making a big to do over yourself proved too much hassle, so it was shelved for Sundays and special occasions. Country women who did a lot of primping were regarded as suspicious, even wayward, probably chasing after somebody's husband. But it must have been different here. Helen figured she had a lot to learn.

"You all set in there?" called Corrine. "I'm just about done out here."

"Alright," said Helen. Being nosy, she opened a lipstick tube, noted its mulberry shade, lifted a hairbrush, inspected thick bristles. As she set it down, a cockroach scurried across the sink. She winced. This, too, was something new.

The two sisters sat at a small table in a little space between the kitchen and the living room. Corrine had fixed Helen's plate and herself a piece of toast and a cup of coffee. She folded and creased the paper to the classified section and began scanning for jobs.

"I know you's bout sick of maid's work, but that's what's most available. You can always start with that and find something better later." Corrine squinted and read aloud: "Colored help. Light cleaning and ironing. Some cooking. Weekly pay. Mrs. Caldwood. 83 North Luxton Blvd. Call 718-8723 for interview."

Helen forked scrambled eggs into her mouth and sipped juice, peering sheepishly at her big sister over the upturned glass. She seemed so sure of herself. But not Helen, no, never Helen. She remembered the day when, at sixteen, her mama had scooted her out the front door to find work. Six years experience had taught Helen about hard work, human nature, and even

death, but it had done nothing for her confidence. She grew more uncertain. Strange folks. Strange streets.

Corrine looked from the paper to Helen. “You ain’t worried bout getting work, is you? If you cleaned house for them plantation-acting snobs down South, you know you can work to suit these here city whites. Anyway, if it don’t pan out, I’ll take you to Mr. Hopkins at the shoe factory, tell him you’re my sister from down south looking for work, see what he say.” Helen hardly knew what a factory was. Big machinery, maybe tools, and a lot of noise. A house seemed safer, quieter. Come Monday, she’d go for the maid’s work.

After breakfast, it didn’t take long for Helen to settle in. She didn’t have a room to herself or a bed of her own, but that was fine. She could make do. Her sister had moved a little trunk out in front of the sofa for her to store her personals; she had given her the bottom shelf on the rack in the bathroom, the bottom drawer of her bureau in the bedroom, and the right half of her closet. Helen knew that Corrine would give her right arm, if need be. Family was family. They were raised that way.

“I got enough groceries for the week, but after that, you got to pitch in. The shoe factory ain’t churning out Colored millionaires.”

Corrine set out a clean set of sheets for later, fluffed a lifeless pillow on the couch, and plopped down. She fingered one pocket for a cigarette and the other for a match. “There’s so much to do in the city on a Saturday night.” The cigarette moved with her mouth. She steadied it, lit. “There’s bars and movie theatres, and jazz clubs with skinny women showboating floppy hats and big voices. Lord, they can blow.” She patted Helen on the thigh, then turned her head to blow smoke. “What you need is a good night on the town. These spots ain’t nothing like that ole

dump Cooke's back home. You step on pavement here, not dusty red mud. There's live folks performing, not some old broke down jukebox with scratched records. To live in the city, you can't dip your feet. You got to jump. I went out there by my lonesome and ended up landing myself a man. We got a date tonight. You'se more than welcome to join."

"Who's your date with?" Helen asked.

"Oh, a fellow I met at a joint. James." She dragged out the "j" and made the "s" buzz. "We've haven't been seeing each other but a month, only been out on a few dates—James got goals. He's working and going to night school, so he don't have much time on his hands. That's the kind of man a Colored woman needs—one who ain't studying liquor bottles and thighs. It ain't just hard to find a good man in the country, you know. Pickins is slim everywhere. But this one might be the luck of the draw. He's fine as wine and got manners for miles."

Helen watched Corrine smash out smoke in the ashtray by the sofa. "When did you take that up?"

"Everybody and their mama done started up with tobacco—not the chewing and spitting kind--the puffing kind. Them little sticks lets you put on airs."

Helen frowned. "How so?"

"Easy. Say you're sitting on a bar stool and a man looks your way. You can blow out a smooth line, toss back your head in a ball of laughter or grin wide as a ole pussycat, flick ashes all prissy-like. Men love airs."

For a brief moment Helen wondered about the airs of Lady Bug, Buck's mistress. She herself never attempted pretense. She doubted that she could pull it off without looking foolish.

Corrine continued. “And if you got something heavy on your mind, it gives you something useful to do, besides chewing on your fingernails and dragging the floor with a pitiful bottom lip.”

Helen looked down at her nubs.

“And cigarettes sure do make you feel a song. If you close your eyes, and take a long drag, the music sinks into your heart.”

“Great day,” said Helen. “For Buck, it just seemed to make him hack.”

Corrine abruptly pulled herself from the conversation to more important matters at hand. She trekked from bedroom to living room, dumping clothes and shoes on the sofa. She pulled mixes and matches and held them up to her, looking to Helen for approval.

“What do you think? The felt red hat and the black pumps or the red pumps and black hat?”

“I don’t know,” said Helen. “All I see is the top and bottom. What happened to the middle?”

Corrine lifted a short satin black skirt and a white blouse. “How about this?”

Helen shrugged. “Looks just fine to me.”

“You ain’t no help.” Corrine pushed the pile aside, sat, and began unplaiting heavy braids. Helen watched her bush grow wild and full.

“During the week I ain’t so particular about my hair. Mostly I keep it tied up. But come the weekend, I want a nice press and curl. I tried fighting these naps myself. And wouldn’t you know it, whilst I was looking for the shoe repair shop, the good Lord led me by accident into The Hair Net down the block. Junie is a whiz with Shirley Temple curls. For a whole month, I been going every other Saturday, but today I canceled the appointment—with you coming and all.”

She looked to Helen's lustrous mane and then down at her long fingers. She remembered their dexterity in scratching dandruff, rubbing grease, and sizzling locks over a flame. "You think you could press my hair?"

Corrine sat in a chair by the stove while Helen maneuvered.

"You remember how long my hair used to be?" Corrine asked.

Helen could not recall this. Corrine's hair had never been this long. Helen was the only girl of four to take hair after her Daddy, who had been half Cherokee. She never needed to do much to her hair, so she spent most of her time tending to everyone else's.

"You remember how all them ole nappy headed girls used to be jealous of me?" asked Corrine. Helen could not recall this, either. If memory served correctly, the second oldest sister, Adell, named after their Mama, had been the true beauty of the bunch—smooth cocoa brown skin and sharp features.

As Helen held the comb in place for the heat to take effect, she tuned out Corrine's rhetorical questions. Instead, she entertained her own thoughts. In a day or so, she would venture out. But for now she preferred the fragile shell of walls—a temporary haven, she knew. For, by Monday, if her will would not shoo her out into the big bad world, her sister surely would. Helen revealed her worries through a long, labored sigh.

"You alright?" Corrine asked.

"Uh-huh," Helen lied. "Hold your head down. I got to get to your kitchen."

Helen had grown used to living vicariously—where it was safe—mostly through her mother-in-law's tragic tales. Life was a stiff drink and Helen had never quite gotten used to the sting--the dullness of excess, the messy explosion, or the soft tingle of it in just the right dose. Or maybe life was more like a card game. And Helen was a novice. She didn't know what to bet,

or how much. She had been bold, chanced it once. And lost. Playing the game was tricky, even dangerous, and winning, out of the question.

Helen held the tiny mirror in place for her sister to critique her hairdo. Corrine's assessment was interrupted by a knock at the door. She quickly pushed Helen's hand aside and leaped up rushing to her bedroom. "Lord, he's early. Helen, answer that."

Helen watched James's dark eyes tighten in question.

"I'm Helen, Corrine's sister. You must be James." They shook hands. "Corrine's still getting dressed. Come on in."

James followed Helen to the living room, where she offered him a seat and some iced tea. When Helen returned, he had crossed his legs and was wiping a smudge off his shoe—two-toned, black and white, with skinny laces and a thick heel. The shoes further sparked her curiosity. Pin-striped suit, pants cuffed at the bottom. He pulled out a small pocket watch, wiped it alongside his pants, and tucked it back into his pocket. Dark brown skin, thick sideburns, knotty hair, slicked back in pomade, broad nose. Helen stood looking, forgetting to offer him the glass. James felt her gaze, met it.

"When did you get into town?" he asked.

"Last night." She handed him the drink.

James nodded. "Where you from?"

"Virginia."

"You come a long way. What brought you?"

Helen squirmed. Questions like this were to be expected, Helen knew, yet she was unprepared. Corrine pranced in as a saving grace.

Both Helen and James gawked at the sight. Corrine's full red mouth parted in feigned shyness. She batted her lashes, showed off some new vocabulary she had been practicing. "How do, James? Did you have the opportunity to meet my dear sister, Helen, who met with tragedy down south and will be staying here a while?"

James nodded and glanced back at Helen. "Yes, I did."

In her plainness Helen felt awkward alongside Helen. She smiled at stared down at the floor.

Corrine looked to James with anticipation. "I'm all set."

James rose, towering over Corrine's petite stature. He helped her into her coat. They nodded Helen goodbye and left.

Silence. Helen gazed around the compact quarters. Barely furnished, worn. Plain, yet homey. Corrine had splashed a touch of herself in family photographs. The curtains at the window were definitely sewn by her hands, the flowered couch a reflection of her love of bright colors and patterns. She had paved a way for herself. She had dared to step out alone.

Helen had never been alone. She had grown up amidst a family of four sisters in a two room shack where there was always a voice, a creak, a cough, a chuckle, a noise of some kind that never allowed lonesomeness or time for private thoughts. Then, newly married, she had moved into Betty's tilting two-story. Even when Buck was off working or gallivanting, close by Betty hummed and shuffled about.

No. Never in her life had Helen been alone.

As Helen undressed, she noticed her silhouette on the shade. She moved from the window to the far wall and slipped into her gown. After she pulled out the couch and dressed it

with sheets, she settled under the covers and peered around. Outside there was more than the bushes or the foreboding boogie man; the city pulsed with foreign noise. She heard shouting, laughter. She lay, staring up at the ceiling at flashes of light, oblong and far reaching, that came and left with passing cars. She strained to make out the outline of furniture that made a maze of the room.

Helen thought of Mary Agnes and her heart filled up with such a weight of pain and happiness that she thought it would burst. Her precious little baby needed her and she had abandoned it. God forgive her! The sound of Mary Agnes' steady cry in her head tingled and filled her breasts. Warm milk leaked down her stomach.

Love had wrung her heart like a wet rag. First Buck, by his dogged persistence, and then Mary Agnes, by her sheer innocence. Betrayal had left her uncertain, fearful. In the darkness, Helen was petrified of what lurked. Not the shadows, but tomorrow, and the next day. Longing for yesterday, for familiarity pricked her for hours. Finally, her heavy heart and red eyes exhausted themselves. Fear sparked nightmares. She jumped at the sound of Corrine's giggling. A dream? No. The silence had to be their long kiss goodnight. More carefree giggling, mixed with James' deep voice. As the door closed, so did Helen's eyes. She did not respond when Corrine whispered her name. For a single moment she loathed her. What Corrine was doing was sinful. All dolled up and perfumed. Unabashedly enjoying a good time, a good smoke, a good caress, and a good feeling. After she heard Corrine's bedroom door close, Helen choked on her tears and stuffed the edge of the pillow in her mouth to keep from hollering out.

Chapter Eleven

The next morning when Corrine called for her, Helen could not seem to get up; she was disoriented from the night before. She tapped her on the foot. “Rise and shine, Missy.” She moved noisily around her. “If you ain’t got nothing to wear for church, I might can loan you something.” She stopped to shake her head at Helen’s curves contoured by thin blankets. “Course, you know you can’t wear much of what I got—with you toting around all that butt and hips.” Corrine let out a chuckle. “Miss Betty musta been stuffing you with nothing but fatback and lard. I reckon you know it ain’t gonna be all that home cooked nonsense around here—lessen married life learned you how to cook. You go in the bathroom first.”

Tabernacle Baptist Church was walking distance—four blocks up. Helen was used to walking country miles that stretched to eternity, but that was in flat, leather tie-ups. These tight patent leathers were a different matter altogether. Her bunions rubbed coarsely against the tight material. Before long she was limping. Sometimes she slowed down, paused, and then hurried to catch up with Corrine, who, enthralled in recounting the most impressive details of her evening, maintained a steady pace.

“James took me to a Speak Easy on 154 St.—The Kitty Kat. Kat is spelled with a “k” because it’s owned by a big time bootlegger that named it after his daughter, Kateland. Now, who ever heard of a Colored girl named Kateland? Colored bootlegger being high siddity. They continued on their path in silence for a while, crossing a few blocks that to Helen seemed like miles.

“I tell you one thing, though,” Corrine continued, “The Kitty Kat sure is a class act—crystal chandeliers hanging all over the place. We did some kind of jig—the Charleston-- that made me sweat out my curls—so much kicking and waving. But, no matter how much moving and shaking we done, James didn’t break a sweat. I believe he got ice in his drawers.” Corrine chuckled, blushed a little. “Lord, I do believe I need to go to church—me talking about a man’s drawers on a Sunday morning!”

“What’d you say that dance was called?” Helen asked. Despite her discomfort, she was still trying to engage.

“The Charleston.”

“Sounds like the name of a city.”

“It is. It’s in South Carolina. Girl, you been in the woods too long. Charleston is a real ritzy town—it’s like a Southern Harlem, only it’s mostly white folks that’s living good.”

Helen then realized that she had not seen a white face since she had arrived. “Ain’t no white folks round here, huh?”

Corrine’s impatience flared at Helen’s ignorance. “I told you in all them letters I wrote that Harlem ain’t got nothing but Coloreds. Anyway, let me finish about The Kitty Kat...”

Helen's thoughts began to drift from Corrine's chatter to her diverse surroundings. They passed the window of a butcher shop, with a window's view of pig's feet, hog maw, and chitterlings. Next door was a book store. What was the need for this? Coloreds could hardly read, Helen thought, and those that could, work kept them from doing much of it. She herself had made it out of the one room schoolhouse and hadn't touched a book since. She had had no reason to. And then came Buck. His rough-from-labor hands could hardly steady a pen to write his name, but they sure had taught her a thing or two.

The women stopped outside a square, brick building that looked nothing like a church. But there, beside the iron railing, was the wooden sign—Tabernacle Baptist painted in dark letters. Helen gazed at worshipers, the women with dark hats, matching boas and white gloves, gripping tiny patent leather pocketbooks, and the gentlemen in tweed coats and spit-shined shoes. They made their way in without interruption and settled on an empty pew up front. Helen hadn't sat anywhere near the front of the pulpit since she had married Buck. Her sinful husband had distanced himself, literally, from godliness.

The choir marched down the aisle, climbed the steps, settled up high in three rows, and began swaying to the organist's strong playing. A mix of young and old, male and female, they raised their voices to a vault that made Helen's toes curl. Well, they would have—if there were had been room in Corrine's shoes. The tingle Helen felt signified that she had a spirit, a soul. She couldn't deny this, nor should she, for it was a soul that separated men from beasts. The white man had always tried to deny this quality in Coloreds. But she knew different.

Helen soon found herself swaying in sync to the choir's movements. She clapped, tapped her feet a little. Her throat tightened. She had a feeling she would weep this service.

The reverend, who had sat in a fancily carved, high-back chair, now stood. He was a good-looking man, probably 55, no more than 60. Gray hairs sprouted from slicked back blackness. His expression was serious, his movements, measured. Through this man, anointed, God was going to send Helen a message. Again, she had a feeling.

Helen turned to Romans, 8:18, and underlined the reverend's opening passage as he read: "For I reckon that the suffering of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

He broke this down in layman's terms. "In other words, Christians, y'all need to hang through the tough times to see the sunshine. Amen. A hard time leads to a gold mine. You got to keep moving." He pointed to the congregation. "You might be thirsty, might be tired, might be weak, might stumble, but my God"—he pointed upwards—"oh thank you, my God, for the blood of your son, Jesus Christ, who died for me, who set my soul free with his blood, trouble won't last long!" There was loud clapping, shouts and he waited for the noise to subside before continuing. "The Bible says that my Father has an unchanging hand and all I got to do is hold onto it. Don't matter if I fall, God gon pick me up. Don't matter if I'm thirsty, there'll be a well waiting for me. Don't matter if it's dark. The morning will come. Christians, trouble don't last long. You got to hold on! You got to have faith!" He jumped up and down, shook his head, jumped up and down again. The organist sanctified his proclamation by pressing heavily on keys.

There was more clapping, hallelujahs, amens. Then the choir stood for another hymn—"Amazing Grace." Helen unleashed her misery. Oh, she was a wretch that needed saving. She

was lost. And blind. And everything else a poor woman who had left her husband and infant baby girl to travel to a strange city with no money and no job could be.

But the reverend said she had to fight. How in the world could she fight the demons of life if she couldn't fight these tears that rolled and rolled?

Church was inspiration, tiresome—she was emotionally exhausted. And the walk home was treacherous. If she hadn't just left the house of God, she would've cursed, damn shoes. Her first paycheck, first thing, she'd buy her own dress shoes.

While Corrine snored on the couch, Helen made progress in the kitchen. She heartily shook raw chicken in flour and carefully laid each piece in hot grease. She dropped a piece of frozen fatback in a pot of leftover greens that simmered. She slid a pan of sweet potatoes in the oven. She left the food to cook and stood by the window. The horizon was turning gray and orange, and, as the day subsided, the sounds below grew noisier. She got a notion. Tapped Corrine to wake her.

"I'm going outside to find the bus stop. I don't want to drive in the city any more than I have to."

Corrine shifted, wiped a bit of slobber from her mouth. "You want me to come?"

"No. I got dinner on. Just keep your eye on the food."

Helen grabbed her coat and stepped down the dark stairway to the city street. She looked around. There was a bench at the corner. A woman was sitting there. Helen approached.

"Excuse me, miss. Have you ever heard of North Luxton Blvd.?"

The woman's eyes were fixed, she looked hard, but something about Helen's wide-set eyes and Southern accent turned her soft. "Yeah, that's the ritzy part of the city. Got to take two different buses to get there. Take bus #36 to Queens, get off there and take the bus off 149th."

Helen repeated what the woman said, committing her words to memory. She thanked her and headed home. Home? Her entire life she had always to call someone else's home her own or else call herself homeless.

Bright and early, Helen unlatched a wrought iron fence and made her way down a thick marble walk alongside a manicured lawn with modest gardens. The Caldwoods' world and many like hers seemed neatly boxed off from poverty and other atrocities that having little or no money inflicts upon people. Helen released this glum thought with a long sigh. She tapped the brass lion head knocker. No one answered. She knocked again, swallowed hard, twisted her hands nervously. The door finally opened, just an inch, revealing a glimpse of dark brown hair and the edge of eyeglasses.

"Yes?"

"I'm Helen Carrington. I called yesterday--bout the job."

"Oh yes."

A middle-aged woman now stood in full view, smiling. Helen stole a good look at the lady of the house before assuming the role of modesty, her proper place. She noted green eyes, a straight row of white teeth, coral lipstick.

"Come in."

She stepped in and waited. The woman gave her a quick appraisal, introduced herself.

"I'm Rose Caldwood."

She held out her hand, and at first, Helen just looked down at it, amazed. She finally caught on and the two shook--the first step in a formal acquaintance. In the South there wouldn't have been the business of shaking hands. Clearly, in the North some things were different. Helen was then led through a long corridor to a long mahogany table where she answered a short list of questions.

"Where do you live?"

"Harlem, with my sister. I just moved here from Virginia."

"I see. What prompted you to move?"

"Just needed a change is all."

"You look awfully young, Helen. How old are you?"

"21, ma'am."

"Have you ever done domestic work?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am, that's all I ever done."

"Excellent. How many years of experience do you have?"

"Six years."

"Fine. And can you provide a reference?"

"A reference?"

"Yes, someone who can verify the length of time you worked for them and vouch for the quality of your work."

Helen knew what the word reference meant and she knew she didn't have one. No doubt, she was a fine worker, but there was no one to attest to this, with both Mister John and Miss Anne dead. Like a starving, stray dog, she had endured the coldness of one, and gratefully accepted the kindness of the other. Mrs. Caldwood cleared her throat.

“Helen, do you have a reference?”

“They dead.”

Helen watched Mrs. Caldwood’s brow raise. The mood tightened. She cleared her throat. For a moment, they simply stared at each other until Helen, feeling the weight of scrutiny, turned away, and studied the array of blue and white china displayed in an adjacent hutch. Helen was not big on words, had never been one to do much advocating for herself, but she hoped, when she and this woman had shaken hands at the door, that she had noticed her rough palms. Helen was no stranger to work. She was a Southern Colored, loyal and a good cook.

“How did they die?” she asked.

“Typhoid,” she lied.

“Heavens,” she replied.

Helen nodded solemnly. But she was careful not to show too much emotion, for she was counting on another common belief held by white folks—Coloreds were a strong breed.

“Can you start tomorrow?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“8 o’clock sharp, then.”

Helen gathered her purse and followed Mrs. Caldwood to the door. Before leaving, she turned to her, smiled gratefully.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

She exited the property. She tried to absorb all that she had seen. She knew that white folks had their share of troubles, too. But, heavens knows, theirs was difficult to detect, behind the luster of polished silver, sparkling crystal and dazzling jewels.

The years at the Sutherlands had taught Helen to prepare fine food without ever tasting it, to don and iron clothes that someone else would pleasure wearing. Sunlight and good food and high mindedness were for the select, not her. But she took her lumps without protest. She was not bitter.

Chapter Twelve

Back at the small apartment, she aimed to busy herself until Corrine returned from work. She noticed a small bookshelf in the far corner. Interesting. Corrine who was not, as far as Helen could recall, an avid reader, had collected quite a few books and magazines. She settled by the window, and, at first, was tempted by the view. But she had done enough observing for one day—on the bus, and in the market, and on the streets—the conservative whites displaying aristocratic looks, the jazzed up Coloreds in the city—some poor ones in rags, some siddity ones with briefcases and wool coats.

...Back to the bookshelf. A magazine. She studied the title—Crisis. Featuring a short story by Langston Hughes. She turned to the first page and began. The story was written in a language not easy, but certainly possible, to decipher, one that spoke in a Colored person's tongue. Though slow, the reading engrossed her until jingling keys diverted her.

From the door, through the hall, and into the living room, Corrine unfastened, unhooked, and unloaded, shedding her coat, dropping pocketbook and lunch sack, and bending to rub her sore feet. "Lordy, them two days off do more harm than good. Weekends make Mondays hard and long."

Helen quickly set aside the magazine. She was never idle and was ashamed of appearing so. But here, chores were limited. No fresh peas to shell, or cows to milk, or chickens' necks to

wring. There was only so much sweeping and dusting a person could do in two tiny rooms. She had put dinner on. Corrine sniffed the pleantry of pork chops and collards.

“What’s that you got on the stove, gal?” She went to the kitchen, washed her hands, lifted lids. “I ain’t used to coming home to this. You sure know how to mix pots with pans and make music.”

Helen shrugged. “I reckon living with Miss Betty paid off. That woman rolled out biscuits as light as air. Melt in your mouth. I ain’t done nothing but watch her, that’s all.”

Corrine untied her head rag, lit a cigarette, kicked up her feet. She stifled an oncoming cough with a long puff that seemed to soothe her. Her eyes watered. She puffed again, embracing the day’s end and the commencement of an easy evening.

“So how’d the interview go?”

Helen got up to stir the pot. “Fine. I got the job.”

Corrine smiled, blew out a curly-q. “Well, ain’t God good? You ain’t been here two days and you’ve already employed. So what’s she like?”

“Who?”

“Your new misses.”

Helen shrugged. “It’s hard to say. Long as she ain’t nothing like Miss Anne Sutherland, I’m grateful. Anybody’s got to be better than that.”

Corrine frowned as if she suddenly smelled diaper shit. “Was she that bad?”

“No. She was worser than bad. She was pure evil. Had a rattling voice just like a witch and didn’t look much better than one, either. Only difference was, instead of riding off on a broom, she rode out of this here life with a gunshot.”

“How? You ain’t never said what happened to her.”

“She was killed by her own stinginess. Trying to chase people off her land. Old Man Pritchard had just opened up a store across from her lot. He come knocking so humble, asking if he might use her field for customer parking—just till he could clear the brush from the other half a acre beside the place.”

“So I take it she said no.”

“She might not even said no. But that stamped foot and slammed door said it. After a couple hours, when people started parking their motor cars on her lot, she jumped around like a banshee, yelling and running from window to window. Then she got Mister John’s pistol, yanked open her front door, aimed and fired. Next thing I knew, her brains was everywhere.”

Corrine shook her head in astonishment. “You lying.”

“No, I ain’t.” Helen shuddered at the conjured vision. “Let’s not talk about it no more. Spoils my appetite.”

Talk of Miss Anne had dimmed Helen’s mood. Dinner was quiet until Corrine let out an unexpected laugh.

“What’s funny?”

“Nothing. Just thinking bout them fools at work.”

“Who?”

“Coupla fellas work the line with me nailing soles. They crazy. Always talking fresh, looking to laugh. They generally go to the Hat and Sack after work, shoot back a coupla beers, go round back, smoke a coupla reefers.”

“What’s their names?”

“One’s called Squirrel.”

“Squirrel? What kinda name is that? I thought only country folk had them crazy names.”

“I don’t know, but it fit. He’s tiny, always nibbling on sunflower seeds, stuffing his jaws with pork rinds. His teeth is even buck.”

“That’s a beaver, not a squirrel.”

“Well, whatever. They still buck.”

“Who else you work with?”

“There’s Lil Red. I don’t know why they call him little. He’s a big as Paul Bunyan. But I do see how they call him Red. You couldn’t call him nothing but Red—with that bush of sandy hair on his head. Even his mustache and beard is sandy.”

“Is he light-skinned?”

“Yellow as a Jap. Got them funny color eyes, too.” She frowned. “Give me a headache when I look in em. They so bright. Like a thunderstorm brewing.”

“What’s he like, this Lil Red?”

“He don’t act as fool as the rest of em. He come to work on time, don’t take long breaks. He don’t lollygag. When he drink, he don’t get so loud. He laugh some. But then he get a far off look, like he daydreaming. Fellas have to call his name a coupla times before he answer.” Corrine gulped down tea, continued. “There’s one named Squanto.”

“Why they call him that?”

“He claim”—she said “claim” with skepticism—“he’s three-quarter Cherokee.

But he look one whole nigga to me. That straight hair of his come from a hot comb, not no red man.”

“Who else?”

Corrine stopped to think. “Simple.”

“That’s what y’all call him—Simple?”

“Yeah. When you ask him a question, he don’t never have a answer. Could be wearing a watch, and tell you he don’t know what time it is. Could have just had a birthday, and he don’t know how old he is. People get mad, throw up their hands, say, ‘That nigga don’t even know when he have to take a shit, do he?’”

Helen chuckled. “Sounds like fun.”

“I must admit, working round them fools do make the day shorter, the workload lighter. They’s what you call good time fellas. They’s so different from my James.”

“Is James coming by tonight?”

Corrine brushed off her disappointment like a lint ball. “James is busy during the week. I only see him on the weekend.”

Lint is precarious, yet persistent. Quiet lingered.

That first morning, Rose Caldwood had been eagerly expecting her. As Helen entered, a white poodle barked at her feet. Helen didn’t recall a dog, that first visit. She wasn’t used to dogs, at least, not fussy, house dogs.

Rose proceeded with the full tour. Helen followed her, stepping from room to room, suppressing awe and nodding. There was something subtly grand about each room that didn’t shout “money” ostentatiously, but, rather whispered it resolutely from antique piece to piece, from bay window to window. Oriental rugs, bright paint, arched entry ways. Helen’s introduction to each room was brief, yet she knew that she would quickly get to know each space personally, down on her knees.

Helen approached each task with diligence, being certain not to miss a speck or a spot. Under Miss Anne's critical eye, she had grown accustomed to intense scrutiny. She was certain she could surpass Mrs. Caldwood's expectations. By noon she had worked up a sweat. She lifted her apron to wipe her brow. She checked the clock--time to prepare a meal. This was the way her first day played out, and the day after that, until full days turned to a tiresome first week and evolved as routine.

The twenty minute bus ride to the Caldwoods didn't allow Helen much time to think clearly. She mostly stared down at her worn, leather shoes, their sides stretched and contoured by bunions. The soft brown had been dulled by country mud, and now city street grime. Sometimes she looked to other shoes. Most, headed to kitchens or restroom stalls, resembled hers. The black pump or the men's dress shoe was the exception. If she found the shoe of interest, she looked to the face, which, generally, matched the shoe. Tie-ups wore slight frowns or the look of indifference. Those with fancier footwear held their heads at a slight angle, somehow above it all.

When the bus let off, Helen's wandering thoughts grew focused. The ten-minute walk led her to a reality of black shutters, thick shrubbery, rustic brick, and a red door—the Caldwoods.

Another routine had been established at her sister's place. For three Fridays, she had watched Corrine get dolled up and spritzed down for the nightlife. James had been prompt. He rang precisely at 7. And Corrine had been calculating. She was never quite ready. She would whisper with an air of confidence, "Make your man wait."

Tonight James had called to cancel. Helen thought, “Maybe he got tired of waiting.” But she didn’t say anything. She knew when to keep quiet.

Helen silently absorbed Corrine’s defeated body language. Her sister sighed heavily, then busied herself doing much of nothing, except puffing on a cigarette and pacing the floor in spiked heels. She pretended not to notice but she felt her sister’s stare and was suddenly self-conscious—hair cornrowed, face bare, figure hidden beneath a flimsy old housedress. She buried her head deeper in the book she was reading. Suddenly, Corrine walked over to her, snatched the book, laid it on the end table.

“That’s it. No more,” she said. “You ain’t no old, dried up hag, and starting tonight, you gon stop acting like one. Get dressed. We going out.”

Before she could object, Corrine had pulled her to her feet. “You done bought dress shoes for church. You already had a black skirt. I got a nice blouse you can wear. You can slap some color to your cheeks and lips. I’ll put the hot comb on the stove. Once you get done up, you gon be knock-out. I’ll learn you how to carry yourself like one.”

Corrine then showed Helen how to strut. She tilted her head, straightened her back, poked out her butt, and stomped around like a Clydesdale.

Helen shook her head, doubtful. “I ain’t much on strutting. I don’t know how to smoke or even how to dance.” Her voice began to crack a little. “I ain’t funny and I ain’t cute. So you just as well go with some of your other girlfriends.”

“I ain’t got no girlfriends,” Corrine said, “except for Myrtle. And she’s 60 years old, done had two no-good husbands and say she don’t want no parts of a man.”

“Well, I don’t want no parts of one, either,” Helen announced.

“That’s what you say now, but time might change that fixed mind of yours.”

“I’m still a married woman, you know.”

“Ain’t nobody said nothing about all that. You just goin out is all. And you is going out. So you just as well stop back talking.”

Corrine left Helen to stew, then returned with a bright green blouse. “Here. I’m gon heat up the comb.”

In less than an hour, Helen was transformed. She studied her reflection in the looking glass. Her light brown eyes shimmered underneath that powder Corrine had brushed on her lids. And her full lips looked like a pumping heart colored with that bright red lipstick. She never even noticed she had cheekbones until Corrine sharpened her jaws with blush. She looked down to her bosom. Corrine’s blouse could barely contain her full breasts. And she smelled like a flower garden, for her sister had hosed her with toilet water.

Corrine assessed her thoroughly—from her pointed-toed heels to her flappy skirt—to her greased and curled hair.

“What’s wrong?” asked Helen, worry creasing her powdered forehead.

“Nothing,” said Corrine. “I ain’t know how good you could look, that’s all.”

“Oh, go on.” Helen waved away her sister’s flattery. But deep down she felt like a peacock, a colorful and beautiful bird.

The street was noisy, cold. Helen’s legs stiffened. Though the shoes fit, she was not used to walking in heels. Her shoes clonked against the pavement. Who was she kidding? None of this—was right. At that moment, she wished for the quietness of the country, the familiarity. Here she was now, in the middle of loudness and strangeness. Sounds escaped the opening and

closing doors of each building they passed—drunken shouts, profane yelling, dogs barking. Helen focused on the smells—some pungent—urine, smoke—some rather pleasant—fish frying, onions sizzling. Each window was lit. Each person was busy. Even those who were simply standing seemed enthralled in doing nothing.

They passed a few spots with long lines spilling from the entrances. Corrine huffed.

“These crowds is what happens when you get a late start. We may have to settle on The Hat Sack.”

“What kind of place is that?” Helen asked.

“It ain’t nothing fancy, mostly a bunch of hard drinkers and hard workers--not the wanna-be folks who throw away the rent money on liquor that they can’t afford no how. The good thing is, we won’t be packed in like sardines. You can have some space to shine.”

As the two stepped in, Corrine eyed the place carefully. She spotted her work crew and pointed.

“Over there’s them fools I work with.”

She grabbed Helen’s hand and led her through the crowd to the table. She cleared her throat, waited for acknowledgement, then introduced her sister. The men looked to Helen’s face, then down at the rest, quickly, then up again. A tiny man, whom Helen figured, from his munching jaws, had to be Squirrel, got up and pulled out chairs for them. He offered to get them a drink.

“Two whiskey sours on the rocks,” said Corrine. She spoke with authority, sat rigid, back straight.

Helen mused quietly. The lighting dim, the atmosphere obscure, the air filled with the hum of conversation, the sound of laughter and the overpowering rhythm of the juke box. She

studied the people. Young men and women yearning for intimacy, companionship, an escape. Some smiling broadly, waving their contentedness like a banner, some chugging beer with a false sense of bravado, some nursing their drinks alone, quietly desperate and out of place. She empathized with other down-and-out souls.

Both Helen and Corrine had been raised to believe the night life taboo, and liquor the devil's water, in which no man, and, particularly, no woman, should indulge. Clearly, Corrine had adopted a new set of beliefs; Helen had not. Self-conscious and feeling a little guilty, she folded her arms over her bulging breasts.

"So," said Squanto, running his hand across that slicked and pressed hair of his, "we been after Corrine for weeks to bring you out. She done held you prisoner all this time, huh?" He scanned her curves. "And I see why."

Helen smiled shyly. Squirrel returned with the drinks, set the glasses in front of them. Corrine lifted hers, sipped. Helen followed suit. It stung. Both her eyes and her throat. She swallowed hard, suppressed a choke. Corrine tapped a cigarette from her case and immediately acquired airs. She began flicking, not hard, like she did at home. Here her movements were effortless, light. Whatever Simple was now whispering in her ear must have been awfully funny. For someone who didn't know much, he sure knew how to make Corrine laugh. Only Helen knew that her sister's laugh, in all its loudness, was lonely. Helen watched as Corrine laid her cigarette in the ashtray and focused on her drink, emptying her glass with two easy gulps. Then she laid her elbow on the table and rested her chin in her palm. She stared at the array of good-looking women that filled the bar and the dance floor until she noticed that her cigarette had burnt out. Her glass needed a refill. She pushed it over to Simple.

“Simple, get me another drink, man, why don’t you?”

“For a dance I will.”

“Get the drink first and we’ll see.”

In no time, Simple returned. He grinned slyly, handed her the glass. She took it, and as she thanked him, her eyes fixated on the wide gap that separated his two front teeth, which wouldn’t have been so bad, if his teeth were clean and white. But they were neither. Simple didn’t know much about a toothbrush, Corrine noted sourly. James’ teeth were white, chalk white. Simple waited, his brow raised in expectancy. Corrine had to make good on her promise. She sipped long, nearly finishing off another glass, and grabbed Simple’s hand.

In the big mirror in back of the bar Helen noticed a tall man enter. He searched the crowd, and upon spotting Squirrel, approached the table. Looming over them, he slapped hands with Squirrel and Squanto and then turned to Helen, waiting for someone to introduce them. Squirrel did the honors.

“This Corrine’s sister, Helen. Helen, this is Lil Red.”

Lil Red smiled softly, nodded, and Helen did the same. He seated his big frame beside her in a small wooden chair that could hardly hold him. Corrine’s empty spot.

“Where you been?” asked Squanto. “We thought you’d come straight here.”

“I know.” Lil Red’s voice dragged—some would call it lazy, some, slow and easy. “I was talking with the landlord bout the rent. That fool say he raising it two more dollars a week. I told him the hot water don’t half work, the radiator is spilling out cool steam. Plus, the damn roaches is taking over.”

“What he say?”

Lil Red shrugged his hefty shoulders. “He say ain’t his fault. He just take orders from the man overtop him. He live in the same filth as everybody else.”

Squirrel leaned in. “Sometimes I wonder if they ain’t stuffing their own pockets. We don’t never sign nothing when they raise the rent. How we know if it’s legit?”

Lil Red pulled out a cigarette and a wad of crumpled bills from his pocket. He looked to the bar. “I come to forget about the rent. Ain’t no sense in harping on what you can’t do nothing about.” He rose, again towering over the table. “Can I get anything for the lady?”

Helen at first did not realize he was speaking to her. It wasn’t often she was referred to as a lady. In most settings, she was a gal.

“No, thank you, I’m fine.”

Lil Red stared at her hard, unblinking. Helen met his gaze and then looked away. Corrine was right. His eyes blazed of blue and green, but the mix was not unsettling—it was calming. As he walked away, she studied his broad back. She shook her head—what was she thinking? Perhaps, the drink had been too much. Having left Buck or not, she was still his wife. She wore his ring. She had no business looking at someone else’s backside. She had no business being here with a painted face, looking cheap.

When Lil Red returned, he attempted small talk, but Helen wouldn’t latch. She looked into the crowd, disinterested. Before long, only the men at the table conversed. Helen floated idly outside the rope. But she didn’t mind. It was better this way. She waited patiently for Corrine and Simple.

She noticed Lil Red now and again glance at her, in between a laugh, or in the middle of private conversation. Helen found herself listening offhandedly. Lil Red’s voice stood out. His

tone was even. Even when the talking grew intense with animation, he never raised his voice. He spoke in monotone, no matter the level of excitement.

Corrine returned to table, patting her damp brow.

“Simple,” she said, “you gon tear splinters in the dance floor—you keep it up.”

Simple grabbed Corrine by the waist and she slapped his hand away. She was half-high, but not completely drunk, and her tap reminded him so.

“Gal,” he said, “you come straight off the flapper line, swinging like that.”

“Simple, you just as well cut the sweet talk.”

“Oh, I forgot-- you got a tag on you.” He looked around, chiding her. “Where is this James? How come you don’t never bring him round?”

Melancholy had momentarily slipped Corrine’s mind, but Simple had reminded her.

“Cause.” She spoke defensively. “James don’t come to joints like this.”

“Why?” asked Simple. “He too good?”

“Yes, he is.” Whenever she and James went out, he took her to the other side of the city. He wanted to show her the finer things.

“Ah, nigga, leave her alone,” said Squanto. “Face the fact, Corrine don’t want you. She want somebody more high class—” he hiked up his collar—“like me, for instance.”

“Fool,” said Squirrel, “just cause you slap a wad of grease in your hair and call yourself a Indian, don’t mean you high class.”

The others broke out in a ball of laughter. Unable to pull himself from her grip, Simple stared misty-eyed at Corrine. Helen saw, from the puppy dog look her was wearing that he found Corrine’s charm to be irresistible. He flared his nostrils with desire. He inhaled deeply.

She was so busy watching Simple watch Corrine that she at first did not notice a woman, a blot of brown with no distinguishing features, except a snarly frown, standing behind him, cutting a lethal eye at him. Simple felt the jab and turned to her.

“Simple, what the hell’s all this? You said you wasn’t going nowhere tonight.” She frowned up her nose at Helen and Corrine.

The old Simple, not the gregarious flirt—the one with the blank expression—returned. “I—uh—I—”

“You cheating on me.” She declared, rather than asked, and proceeded to draw back a gnarled, weak-looking fist.

The fellows at the table backed away. Lil Red wedged himself between Simple and his angry woman. Helen noted the power in his stature. Corrine tapped her.

“Come on. Looks like trouble. We’d better go.”

The two women gathered up, slipped away, around tables, and through people, back into the cold. Only now, Helen was numb to it. The new experience of the joint lingered with her. Far into the night, after she had tucked herself underneath warm covers, the music, the smoke, the strange faces dispersed themselves into her dreams of Mary Agnes and Buck. She thought she was still dreaming when the phone rang. But the ringing persisted.

It was Betty voice. “Buck’s gone.”

Helen’s stomach tightened into a knot. She knew what Betty meant but held onto hope, and asked, anyway. “Gone where?”

“He’s gone, I say. He’s dead!”

She felt light, heavy, hot, cold. Her temple and underarms began to perspire, and her mouth went dry. The room twisted in a haze. She squinted into the darkness.

“You hear me, Helen? I say, my boy is gone from me! Lord, Jesus, heavenly Father. Help me, Lord, Jesus!”

Helen kept quiet, for she was at a loss for words. She knew the weight of Buck in Betty’s life. Her happiness depended upon his existence. Finally, over Betty’s sobs, she spoke.

“God help us, Miss Betty. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Corrine was now beside her. She touched her lightly.

“It’s Buck, ain’t it? Something done happened?”

“He’s dead.” She hardly believed what she was saying.

Corrine pulled Helen to her, as she had done that first morning, two months ago, when she had stood vulnerable at her doorstep. Helen trembled, then fell upon her sister and let out a resonant wail. The rush of tears wet Corrine’s shoulder, but she managed to stand firm under the weight and pressure. She reached up to stroke Helen’s hair.

“Now, now, it’s gon be alright,” she said. But Helen didn’t think so. She shook her head. “It can’t be. Buck was so strong. I can’t imagine nothing or no one taking him down.”

“Did Miss Betty say what happened?”

Helen shook her head. “Maybe white folks got him. Maybe somebody cut him. Or some jealous woman shot him. No telling. Anyhow”--she lifted herself from Corrine, knuckled under her eyes and tried to focus, be sensible--“I got to pack.”

“You want me to help?”

“Nah.”

“You want me to go?”

“You ain’t got to.”

Corrine insisted. “I’m going. I just got to send word to Mr. Jones to take a few days off.”

Helen thought of the Caldwoods. Being employed for such a short period of time, she should inform them in person. She would drive. Her car had collected dust since she had arrived in the big city, for she had been too nervous to drive amidst honking horns and stoplights and the steady bustle she considered chaotic.

Corrine rode with her, for support.

Helen pulled the crank. The fender rattled furiously. She looked behind and in front—she was jammed tightly between two cars. Buck had taught her how to maneuver this thing on open road and wide field. She didn’t know anything about marginal lines and thin lanes. She bumped the car in front—and in back.

“Gal, you sure you know how to drive?”

Helen gassed forward with a bit too much force—tapped again.

“Yeah, I know how to drive. My nerves is bad—that’s all. I drove up here, didn’t I?”

Corrine kept quiet, watched and waited.

With concentrated effort, Helen emerged from the jam, and successfully merged into traffic.

“You alright?” Corrine asked.

“Yeah.” Helen gripped the wheel, nervously watched for other cars while maintaining her own.

“Make a right at the corner,” Corrine said.

Helen halted. Cars honked. “Where?”

Corrine looked back, directed Helen with impatience. “Don’t stop in traffic. Somebody’s liable to hit us. At the corner,” she pointed.

This route was different from the bus route, and Corrine continued to blurt directions without ample warning. Helen was relieved when, a half hour later, she turned onto North Luxton. She stopped in front of a two-story, brick manor and looked to Corrine.

“I won’t be but a minute.”

She trailed the walk, head hung.

Mrs.Caldwood cracked the door and peered through the small opening.

“Helen?” She frowned at her maid’s disheveled appearance and her harried look. “What is it?”

“I got some bad news and I got to go to Virginia. I was wondering if I could take a few days off.”

“What happened?”

“A death in the family.”

“Good heavens. I am so sorry to hear that. It was a close relative, I presume?”

“Yes, ma’am, a close relative.”

“A few days will be fine, Helen. Take care and have a safe trip.” Helen nodded appreciatively but her gratitude was mixed with embarrassment. She knew what her new mistress must have been thinking—Coloreds sure do endure more than their fair share of deaths.

For hours on end, Helen felt like she was viewing a picture show backwards. She had traveled miles of countryside to get to tall buildings and streets. Now the reel was turning opposite. Tight housing developments yielded to mile after mile of hills and underbrush. The air, darkened by soot and smoke from factories, lifted, and the hard, barren earth softened. Rural—urban—starkly different, yet the struggle and strife were the same. Whether you were shoveling hay or gathering up dishes and flatware, you worked for pennies for the white man, and on Friday, you tried to dance away, make love away, or drink away the dread of another Monday, another week, another month, a lifetime of much of nothing. If you weren't careful, it left a bitter taste in your mouth that you swallowed with every 'yes, sir' and 'sorry, sir, I'll get that' and 'yes, ma'am, I'd be obliged.' After a while you start to quietly hate—the white man for being your superior, yourself for shuffling along.

To not fall into the pit of hate, you had to be careful. In the city it was possible to be careful, to be mindful, for there were reminders of real living at every turn—books, operas, schools--opportunities. Yes, Helen decided, that was the marginal difference.

Helen glanced over at Corrine who had turned to the window and was cramped to an uncomfortable resting position. She was roused often—by the motorcar's loud engine, by hunger, by boredom. She awoke, leaned forward, reached down, and unwrapped a piece of cold, fried chicken. She leaned back, bit into it, wiped her mouth.

"I thought you was sleep," Helen said.

"Half-sleep. How much longer we got?"

"Quite a ways. You must done forgot how far away Virginia is."

"Nah, believe me," she said, still chewing, "I ain't forgot."

Helen sighed. "Just take a coupla more naps. We'll get there."

Corrine settled herself. Morning drifted to afternoon, descended to evening. But the next time she lifted her head and wiped the sleep from her eyes, she had to pose the question. “Is we there?”

“Yeah, we here.”

More than sadness, an excitement crept into Helen’s heart that made her grab her bags and rush up the planked walk, climb the rickety porch steps, and knock for Mary Agnes. With her granddaughter swung over her hip, Betty answered the door. Helen wept at the sight. She snuggled her face against softness and inhaled the sweet scent of her baby. Corrine was just stepping up. Helen reintroduced them.

“This is Corrine, my sister.”

“Yes, yes,” Betty nodded, “I think I memba you from the wedding. Well,” she sighed, “I reckon y’all is starved, coming so far. I got everything warmed in the stove.”

Through the dim hall they trekked over creaking floorboards. Corrine followed closely behind Helen, wriggling Mary Agnes’ finger and smiling at her. Helen set her bags in the kitchen. Expecting Buck to stroll in, she kept her eye on the side door. She envisioned him making an entrance, grabbing Betty from behind and swinging her around and around. Betty would fight a blush, say, “Boy, stop playing--you supposed to be dead.”

And he’d say, right cocky-like, “Now, Mama, you know Ole Buck got nine lives. Your baby son is right here.”

Lost in her daydream, Helen let out a half-smile. Mary Agnes’ whimper pulled her from it. She bounced her and watched Miss Betty’s back at the stove.

For her mother-in-law, more than herself, she wished things could have turned out differently. Betty fixed plates, poured tea, piddled, stood watching. Helen insisted that she sit down. But she refused, said she had no appetite.

“Eat as much as you want. I ain’t got nobody else to cook for, Lord hammercy, Lord hammercy.” She heaved and her big bosom shook with inconsolable grief.

Corrine picked her teeth, sliced another piece of ham. The food kept her from looking up, from noticing.

Helen swallowed down tiny bites which passed down like briers. She tried to damn the flood of emotion that had hit her. Instead, she focused on Betty, the matriarch, who was always so strong, but who now couldn’t keep from wailing. Helen rose to rub her softly on her back and to stroke the back of her head.

Betty seemed to gather her wits a bit. “Hazel Belle should be coming off the train any minute,” she said. “Florraine and Martha Jane’s gone to get her.”

Helen attempted to steer the conversation away from the topic of Buck. “How’s Hazel Belle?”

Betty shrugged. “She’s fine, I reckon. Don’t hear much from her. She bout finished with schooling. Got a secretary job in a Colored business office.” Betty looked to Helen. “What bout you? You like it up north?”

Helen tried to downplay her enthusiasm. “It ain’t bad. Takes some getting used to.”

Corrine savored the last piece of apple pie, gulped down the last of her tea. “Thank you so much, Miss Betty.” She turned to Helen, whispered to her. “It’s getting late. You reckon we oughta head on to the home place?”

The home place, the small shack where Helen and her three sisters had been born and raised until marriage or ambition had thrust them from the nest. Since Buck, Helen saw her parents sporadically, for she had unioned with him, despite their blatant disapproval.

Miss Betty, always hospitable, interjected. “Now, sugar, I know you want to see your folks, but you’re welcome to come back and stay here. I got plenty room.”

Corrine smiled, gazing at the open cupboard packed with goods. “I sure am tempted by the offer, but Mama might take it personal if I come all the way here and don’t spend time with her.”

Helen started with the dishes, but Betty stopped her. “Go on now. It ain’t good for y’all to be out alone, in the dark.” She shook her head. “Country done shown itself to be dangerous.”

Chapter Thirteen

Though Joseph and Adell had gotten word of Buck's sudden death and knew Helen would be coming, they made no special preparation.

"Hope y'all done ate," Adell said, sizing up her girls from head to toe, "cause I just cleaned up."

Both women bent to kiss their mother, who was seated in a rocker by the stove.

"Where's Papa?" Helen asked.

"Out in the fields feeding the cows."

Helen didn't expect condolences, but she didn't expect nonchalance, either. Perhaps, she had been naïve. What followed brought tears to her eyes.

"They say some white boys bashed Buck's head in whilst he was on top of some half-white woman. Then they dragged him to the woods and shot him in the back of the head."

"Mama." Corrine spoke the word with disdain. Big city or back home she was protective of her little sister. "Take it easy."

Adell shrugged. "I thought maybe you knowed."

Helen gathered her coat. "I'd better get on back to Betty."

"Ain't you gon stay here?" asked Corrine.

"Nah, I want to be with Mary Agnes."

“Miss Betty got her daughters coming, and who knows who else might drop in. She might not have room for you,” her mother said.

“She got room for me. Corrine, you coming?”

Corrine looked to her mother, who folded her lips at her. “You go on,” she said.

Except for the putter of the engine, inside the motorcar was quiet. Thoughts of Buck’s demise, combined with vast darkness of the outside, were unsettling. Could danger lurk? If she were stopped, and someone recognized her as Buck’s wife, would she be beaten, raped, or God forbid, killed? She had been stopped by Junior Stinell on the day she departed. From his horse, he had bent to the car, sneered at her and Betty, spat tobacco, and asked about the whereabouts of Buck. The day had been calamitous—first Miss Anne’s bizarre and violent death, and then, Junior’s inquiry—his steel gray eyes piercing with venom.

There had always been bad blood between Buck, a loud-mouthed nigra, and Junior, a cold-hearted cracker. The two were a bad mix—each regarding the other with contempt. Buck was the same as horse dung—dark, stinky, and worthless, except on a field. And Junior was a snake—treacherous, eating the lower class whole. A blow-up, Helen knew, had been inevitable, for as Buck often professed, he was “tired of taking shit off white folks.” He was going to strike back. If he lost, at least he went down swinging.

Helen hummed “Amazing Grace” to herself. But it was not she who was the wretch. It was Buck who lay thick and cold on an undertaker’s table. A slab of skin. In the darkness, she grieved without restraint. She cried out for him. “Buck! No, Buck!” She cursed him. “You fool! You damned fool!”

He had always been a fool. Reckless and self-indulgent. He satisfied his own desires with no regard for others, with no foresight of the damage. He spoke to whites with arrogance, cursed his cronies, even berated his dear mother. No one crossed Buck without repercussion. But for her, and only her, he had a soft spot and would humble himself. He would lie, promise. She would submit, hope. With his death, ultimately, he had betrayed her one final time.

She had thought she hated him, that morning, when, desperate, she had packed and left. But, now, she knew differently. She loved him. She had loved him from the first—his wild spirit and dancing eyes—rough hands that cradled breasts as easily and confidently as they did beer bottles in the juke joint. He was a wild stallion that could only be content running free. She could not tame him with the sanctity of marriage. No, Buck could not be tamed. “Buck,” she called. But this time she spoke calmly.

As she pulled into Betty’s lot and inched up the hill, she noticed another motorcar. Betty’s daughters. She wiped her eyes. Sat a moment in the parked car. She would not be emotional. She had to wear the mask of a scorned wife.

The house was brimming with conversation and Betty’s rustling. She was busy with the second round of supper. Helen felt unexpectedly shy and out of place, entering the room of chatter and eating. But Hazel Belle’s hug quickly diminished awkwardness.

“How’ve you been, honey?” she asked.

“Pretty good.”

Helen nodded a how-do to the other two women, who smiled back and spoke respectfully, but it was Hazel Belle again who grabbed her by the arm and led her into the parlor for intimacy.

“So you done it,” she said. “Mama told me you had left Buck. He was my brother, but, believe me, I ain’t mad at you for doing so. He had some devilish ways about him, but whatever he was, he didn’t deserve this.” Silence. “It’s just so hard, him dying violent, dying young.”

Helen nodded.

“So you staying with Corrine?”

“Yeah. She always told me if I ever decided to come North, to come see her.”

“What street is she on?”

“Lexington.”

“Lexington? I ain’t but five blocks from Lexington. I’m on Hundley. When you get back and things settle down, look me up.” She leaned in, tapped Helen’s hand. “Whatever happened between you and my brother, and even though he is gone--we still family.”

They sat on the couch side by side, hand-in-hand. A comfort to one another. Sisters-in-law. They didn’t rouse until Betty called for them.

“Hazel Belle and Helen, y’all may as well get fixing for bed. Y’all done traveled far and you bound to be dog-tired.”

Betty was right. The trip to Virginia was long. Emotion had drained her. But more than thick quilts, Helen craved closeness with her daughter. She climbed the steps and stopped in the doorway of her and Buck’s bedroom. Mary Agnes’ crib and memories. To get to her daughter, she had to endure the sting of flashbacks. She made her way slowly on their marital bed. Buck’s ghost stood in front of her—in gingham pants, his bare chest glistening with the sweat of a hard day’s work, the room smelling like feet and hay. She would tease him.

“Buck, you smell like horse shit. Ain’t you gon air out your stink?”

He would smile wide, revealing even, white teeth. “Now, gal, why would I do that? When you know goodness well once I get into that poontang of yours, the room gon be get funky, anyway?”

“Buck, you’s crazy,” she’d say, butterflies fluttering before he even touched her. For she knew the dexterity of his touch, the feel of his hard-pressed groin, his stamina.

“Long as you know it.”

But all times were not as happy and light as this.

She strained again to see the shadow of Buck, his head hung, back turned as he undressed. She knew he had squandered an entire week’s pay on liquor, poker, or some high yellow harlot. Her silence screamed of disappointment. Tears wet her pillow.

Most nights she would sulk. But sometimes she would step to him and ask, in a fierce whisper, so as not to disturb Betty, where was his money, why the savings for their own house hadn’t increased a single penny in months.

He’d flash her a pitiful look.

“Ain’t nothing I can say, baby. Sometimes I get carried away is all.”

“Buck, you’s a no count nigga—that’s what you are.”

“You’re right, baby. I ain’t no good. I ain’t worth a good God damn. I don’t know what you even see in a poor, worthless nigga like me.”

“Don’t try to make me pity you, man. Them tricks don’t work with me.”

But most times he could somehow manage to ease her anger.

Yes, Buck had claimed her body; he had claimed her heart. And that sleeping angel in the crib next to the bed was living proof of their love. She tipped over and peered at Mary Agnes.

“You alright in there?” Hazel Belle whispered.

“Uh-huh,” she whispered back.

“If you got to pee in the night, the pot is in Mama’s room. See you in the morning. Try to rest.”

Helen tossed and turned all night, awaking from the fullness of fantasy, or the emptiness of reality. As dawn approached, Mary Agnes’ whimper freed her from the night’s captivity. She tipped over cold, creaking floorboards, lifted her baby, and nestled her to her breast. Mary Agnes quieted.

“You memba your Mama’s scent, don’t you, sugar plum?”

From the day she birthed her to the day she left, Helen had nursed Mary Agnes. Her conscience was eased by the plumpness of her little arms and legs, that her baby had adapted well to cow’s milk and the mashed food her grandmother spoon and finger fed her. She had flourished under Betty’s hand.

Hazel Belle crept in, yawned, sat beside Helen, and smiled at her niece.

“I’m sure glad some sunshine is in this house, with the dark day that’s coming. I don’t know if Mama will be able to stand it. Everybody knows Buck was her favorite.”

Helen knew this to be true, but she kept quiet.

Betty peeped in. She had a rag tied around her head and wore a draping flannel nightie. “Hazel Belle, get dressed. You and your sisters need to take Buck’s suit to the undertaker. I done washed it and ironed it. It’s hanging downstairs.”

The routine of the morning, alone with Miss Betty and Mary Agnes, was nostalgic. Almost. Betty prepared breakfast, while Helen sat at the table, cooing at Mary Agnes. Before long, Sammy Nash would knock for Buck, sit outside, roll tobacco and wait. And Buck would come strutting down the stairs in his overalls and cap. He would wolf down a warm biscuit in a plate of fried apples, grab his lunch sack from his Mama, and bend to kiss his wife and baby. The rickety door would slam behind him.

Only none of that happened. Instead, Helen sat, staring at Betty as she bent over the table, setting down dishes. Her round face sagged like a hound dog. She, who usually moved with briskness, now trudged slowly from the wood stove to the sink to the table. With not an ounce of energy left to spare, she dropped her heavy frame in the chair with one exasperated thump, buried her face in her hands, wept. Helen at once lifted herself to rub her mother-in-law’s shoulders and to stroke the back of her thick auburn-mixed-with-gray hair.

Betty reached back to touch Helen’s hand. “The months without you has been lonesome, Helen.”

“Ah, go on, Miss Betty, I ain’t nobody to miss.”

“With my girls moved away, you was like my daughter.”

“But you had Buck. And I left you Mary Agnes,” Helen said, still stroking.

“I know. But Buck ain’t big on talking and he even less good for listening. As much as I adore my lil grandbaby, I sure did miss your company. I ain’t never had many friends. I left

most of them behind when I married Fleming. You know that Up on the Ridge, where I come from, they didn't allow light to mix with dark." She looked earnestly at Helen. "You was not only my daughter by marriage, but my friend. I won't be the onliest one who missed you. Buck stayed gone more and more. Drinking like a fish and gambling away all his money. He'd come home dirty and stinking—a right poor critter." She shook her head, remembering. "I couldn't talk no sense into him, never could. That was one mule-headed boy I birthed. When they pulled him out of me, he was kicking." Betty's nostalgic smile quickly faded. "I knew there was trouble brewing between him and Junior Stinell. Nigga can't touch a hair on a white man's head and get away with it. But them bastards ain't have to kill my boy." Betty wept into her apron.

Helen was relieved by the knock at the door. It was the some of the Jenkins folks from a few miles down. An elderly lady, a little boy, and a woman about Helen's age stood. Helen noticed the brown paper bag.

"We sorry bout your loss," the woman said.

Helen accepted the bag. "Thank you."

Betty's noisy weeping traveled from the kitchen to the open door.

"It's a ham and a pound cake in there. Just tell Miss Betty we dropped by."

Helen nodded and closed the door. She carried the food into the kitchen. Betty was emitting a great long belch into her fist, her usual response to stress.

"Miss Betty, you want me to fix you a lil baking soda and warm water?"

"Maybe so, darling. Meanwhile, I'm going upstairs to tidy up. Them lazy heiffas of mine ain't have the decency to make their beds."

Miss Betty struggled to maintain a grip on life. She limped away. Helen had always known her to hobble, but she had also known her to persevere. Slowly, steadily, surely. Betty

had traveled five miles on foot in relentless heat and cold to get to work. She scrubbed floors, rubbed heavy, wet clothes against a washboard, cooked, canned, cleaned. Arthritic legs and gnarled hands couldn't stop her. Miss Betty had been resilient. Helen had never known any loss to break her, and, from the tragic tales Miss Betty told, she had endured many.

But now she was old. Visibly weaker. Alone downstairs Helen sent up a prayer.

"Dear God, watch over Miss Betty. Give her strength, God, to keep fighting the good fight."

The sisters returned sullen. Helen wondered if they had seen the corpse of Buck, but she didn't inquire. Hazel Belle, still sniffing, lifted herself to answer the knock at the door. It was Sammy Nash. Helen knew Hazel Belle's vanity, always certain that her hair was brushed, that she had dabbed on a bit of lipstick, that her dress was pressed. But now she was standing in front of Sammy a mess. He took off his hat, nodded. Hazel Belle opened the door wider, then turned from him. Helen was surprised by Hazel Belle's reaction, especially at a time like this. Buck was Sammy's closest friend in the world. They worked, gambled, drank, laughed together. They shared so much, were alike in some ways but different in others. Buck was bull-headed, didn't know when to keep that big mouth of his shut. Anybody who knew Buck knew that.

There, in the parlor, Sammy wept. Hazel Belle, forgetting herself, tipped to him, gently touched him, let him lay his head on her shoulder. They wept together until he stood tall and spoke.

"I just come to say I'm sorry bout Buck."

Hazel Belle thanked him. They stood in silence a moment longer before he turned to leave.

The house, except for the drizzle of visitors who sat briefly in the parlor, was quiet and lifeless.

Helen gathered up Mary Agnes.

Corrine was sitting on the porch stoop shivering and puffing on the last of a cigarette.

“What you doing out here in the cold?” Helen asked. “Mama ain’t got no fire?”

Corrine rolled her eyes. “She got fire all right—in that big mouth of hers. She still think you a child, still think she got a right to boss you.” She mimicked her mother’s firm tone. ‘I don’t allow no smoking in my house,’ she say. I tell her I been smoking for fifteen years. She look at me like I am crazy. ‘Where y’all get the notion that it’s fine and dandy for a woman to puff on tobacco?’ Honey, I ain’t been home a day and I’m dying to get back to the city, where I belong. Ain’t no room to stretch out. You ain’t got the privacy to fart less somebody gon hear it or smell it. Once you leave this here kinda living, you don’t hardly want to remember it, much less come back to it.” She threw her cigarette butt on the ground, smashed it with her shoe. “Hand me that baby.” Corrine bounced her. “You took all your looks from your Aunt Corrine, didn’t you, brown sugar?”

Helen objected, matter-of-factly. “She look more like Buck than anybody.”

Corrine lifted her high to examine. “Now, in truth, I believe she look like Miss Betty. She got Buck’s dark coloring, but she got fine features like Miss Betty.” Corrine rubbed the softness of the baby’s hair.

Helen took her. “Watch her soft spot. It’s cold out here. I’d better get her inside.”

Adell’s face lit when she saw the bundle. “Well, Lord in heaven,” she said, “hand her here.”

Helen and Corrine settled to a corner.

“When’s the funeral?”

“Tomorrow. Two o’clock. Mount Zion.”

“How’s things over at Miss Betty’s?”

“Right sad and dark. That’s why me and the baby had to break away.”

Helen got up, stood at the dingy window by the front door, and peered out at the rusty, old swing that sat under the maple at the end of the lot. She saw herself there, six years ago, lolling away lazy evenings with Buck. She looked down at the rotting porch. It was there Buck had grabbed her to him, and, with an urgent kiss and roaming hands, demanded she marry him.

“Helen? Helen?” her mother called.

Helen looked to her mother, but hadn’t fully returned from her daydreams.

“If you don’t mind me saying, you look a mess. You got to get yourself decent for the funeral. You say it’s tomorrow?”

Helen nodded.

“You best get to town. I’ll watch the baby.”

The looks of the small town hadn’t changed much. White-washed, wooden. A handful of arrogant owners who looked to her and other Coloreds like dirt under their fingernails—recurrent, unpleasant, but, as such, a nuisance that had to be endured. Helen traipsed the dusty floor of the general store, searching the aisles for necessities. She set her basket on the counter. Mrs. Blanton held her wrinkled face tightly. The total was one dollar. After Helen paid, she looked at her ticket, then back at Mrs. Blanton.

“How—how much was them stockings?”

“Ten cents.” Mrs. Blanton practically spat the words at her. She didn’t have time for this type of nonsense--being questioned by a Colored. She let nigras in by the front door. She let them have credit.

“In the back you got em marked a nickel.”

Helen offered her the ticket. Mr. Blanton was always changing prices without informing his wife and leaving her alone to run the store. She couldn’t keep up with everything. Mrs. Blanton snatched it, perused it, reached hastily into the register and slapped a nickel on the counter. She turned from Helen, stepped on a stool, and began turning cans of salmon, arranging them so that all the eyes on bright blue fish faced the front at forty-five degree angles. Helen did not pick up the nickel, take her bag, and move along. She looked up at Mrs. Blanton’s backside and then down at her bag. The stockings she could borrow from Corrine, the hair grease—she was sure Hazel Belle would have some—nice as her curls always look. The pork skins and the chewing gum were extras. She stood, waiting. The woman stopped, looked over her shoulder.

“Yes?”

“I done changed my mind bout this stuff. I—I believe I would like all my money back.” Helen felt her temple sweat.

The woman stepped down. “I beg your pardon?”

Helen struggled to steady her gaze. “I said—I believe I want my money back.”

Mrs. Blanton’s face reddened. “On what grounds?”

Helen stammered. “On the grounds that—that I want to take my business elsewhere.”

The two women glared at each other, Mrs. Blanton with contempt, and Helen with insolence. Meanwhile, a Colored patron and then a white one strolled in. Helen ignored them and stood firm. Mrs. Blanton, needing Colored business, as well as white, thus avoiding a scene,

surrendered. She again opened the register and laid the bill on the counter. Helen picked it up, shoved it into her pocketbook.

The woman kept her voice down but she spoke evenly.

“I trust that you, Helen Carrington, will continue to take your business elsewhere. Don’t ever lay your black fingers on my doorknob again. Is that clear?”

Helen nodded with the same evenness. She understood Mrs. Blanton, but, more importantly, Mrs. Blanton had understood her.

This same sense of nervous daring carried Helen down a lonesome dirt road, one that, as she approached her destination, made her heart thump beneath her gingham dress. She inched the car forward, and upon full view of the old plantation, gasped at the neglected sight—the yard barren, shutters hanging precariously, window panes broken, lackluster—Southern grandeur wilted. There, on the porch, beside a thick, beige post stood the illusory figure of Miss Anne, frowning, pursing her thin lips, wispy gray hair billowing, tight, drawn skin pasty and translucent. Beside her waved Mister John, his eyes earnest, because Helen was certainly welcome in his home. She pulled the door latch of the motorcar, and, succumbing to a conscious urging, walked the path and stepped through the unlocked entrance. This was her workplace, her life, and nothing remained but a corpse, fancily dressed, yet rotting. The contents of the house lay undisturbed, a monument to the Sutherland bloodline, in which Miss Anne’s faulty womb had been the clot. Bitterness had filled the house with gloom long before she drew her last breath.

Helen had to adjust to the dimness--dusk darkened the foyer. The spiral staircase loomed, conjured visions. She squinted at her Misses, her bony hands inching down the banister, her frail

form slowly approaching. Clearly, she was displeased at Helen for trespassing. Helen stood a moment, defying her, but, as old habits rarely die, she gave in to fear, turned away, rushed to the door, and, in a breathless panic, scurried to the motorcar, cranked it, and pressed hard on the gas.

Twice she had tried to fight the demon of oppression, and, in her attempts, she was left wounded. Comfort could only be attained within the safety of Miss Betty's walls. She rushed to get there, where it was safe. She gripped the steering wheel, pressed her foot harder on the gas. In the distance she noticed headlights steadily approaching. She gassed even harder, but couldn't escape the inevitable. Soon the headlights were dead on her, then a motorcar was beside her. She flashed the passengers a look of fear. A white face sneered. She turned back to focus on the road. Tears streamed down her cheeks. A voice hollered from the window, "Gal, what you doing out here? You looking for something? Maybe me and the boys can help you find it."

Helen wiped her tears, focused on the road ahead, prayed for mercy. The men sped past her. Helen called out, "Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord." Soon after, she had made her way up the rocky hill, and she wept again, this time with relief, at the sight of the Carrington home. She had never been so glad to see the tilting two-story, and, after tomorrow, would be glad to leave it.

Helen stood poised, her face stoic, heavily powdered. She clutched her purse, her baby. She and Betty, first in the procession, stepped up to double doors held open by ushers. Ahead, Buck lay stretched, his profane tongue silenced, his labored hands folded stiffly across a boxed chest. Above him a floral arrangement boasted of vibrant colors. It bore the words, "Rest in

Peace.” As the two women tentatively approached, Betty leaned heavily on her daughter-in-law and then pressed onto the casket, rubbed Buck’s cold hand. Emotion whirled. Helen wept silently, while Betty cried out. With Hazel Belle’s and Florraine’s aid, she was guided to her place in the front pew.

The choir bellowed “At the Cross.” The church filled and settled. An usher waited for a nod, and then swiftly, deftly, closed the casket. Betty and a few others moaned and hollered out. Reverend Smith commenced a solemn, righteous offering of James Fleming “Buck” Carrington’s soul to glory. As he spoke, Helen’s thoughts drifted along the shore of the surreal. She heard key words like, “salvation” and “kingdom.” But mostly understanding eluded her. She rocked Mary Agnes and looked to the gilded cross on the pulpit, and then to the colorful stained glass windows beyond it. Before long—or had it been long—she wasn’t certain--the pallbearers rose and the singing resumed. It was over.

Helen and Betty, first in, were the last to leave. One lone mourner lingered on the last bench. A wide-rimmed, black hat slowly lifted to reveal a striking face. Cloudy eyes, red from tears, peach mouth, and bright, nearly-white skin. Clearly, this was one of Buck’s mistresses.

“Helen.” She spoke rather timidly. “I was waiting to talk to you.”

Betty looked to the woman with a grim, fixed mouth. She didn’t want no trouble on the day of her son’s funeral.

“It’s okay, Miss Betty.” Helen handed her Mary Agnes. “You go on. I’ll be there shortly.”

The stranger identified herself. “I’m Lula Mae Pierce—from Up on the Ridge. I know Buck—I been seeing Buck for about six months. I was with him the night he died.” Helen sighed. This was difficult, now especially, but she stood, waiting.

The woman continued. “He—after them white boys bust in on us and knocked Buck over the head with the butt of they shotgun—he laid half-conscious. I screamed, hollered out, fearing for my own life. But I learned quick they won’t after me. Only Buck. I bent to him. Blood was gushing out his head like a river. I called to him. And—” she paused, drew in a breath, “he called for you. ‘Helen,’ he say. At first I couldn’t hear him. ‘Helen,’ he muttered.” She looked Helen squarely in the eye, paused. “Your name mighta been the last word come out of Buck Carrington’s mouth. Seem like you was the last thing on his mind. I-I thought maybe you’d want to know is all.”

Lula Mae lightly touched Helen’s hand. Helen nodded, for she acknowledged that this woman had squashed her own pride and envy and confessed the truth. Only charity could possess a wayward woman to the house of the Lord and greet a man’s wife with humility. By this account, she had done a good, Christian deed. She had to call it Christian, no matter that this woman had romped with her husband, that she and Buck had probably shared many a liquored laugh, that his actions had desecrated his marital vow ten times over. But here was the truth, plain and simple, and the truth was, in his heart, he had loved Helen to the end. As his wife, Helen had a right to know this, to hold onto this bit of comfort.

Helen again nodded gratefully, but she could not manage to verbally thank a woman who had shared intimacy with her husband. Exiting the church, she wound her coat tightly around her waist and folded her arms. It was a bitter cold day, but the sun was shining bright.

With the funeral over and Betty’s house quieted and empty of visitors, the matter of Mary Agnes had to be settled.

The night before, again restless, Helen contemplated her choices. She thought of her present state of affairs—no home, no stability. She was still crawling around, trying to find a sturdy spot to make a lift. A lift took time. She thought of Betty—son dead and buried, girls moved on with their lives—lonely and up in age. Nothing could fill the void the loss of Buck had left, except, perhaps, the warmth of her grandbaby’s toothless smile, the gaze of unconditional and boundless adoration. Mary Agnes’ utter dependency would give Betty a reason to prevail. And she needed one.

But what about Helen and her own needs? Days spent with her daughter reminded her of the joy she gleaned from motherhood, of the love that ebbed back and forth between them, as though they hadn’t been apart at all. What about her loneliness, the void in her own life? Helen sighed indecisively. So much at stake. Three lives. Three hearts.

Suitcases packed, she was armed with the intention of two accompanying passengers—Mary Agnes and Corrine. She stood before Betty and searched the old woman’s eyes for objectivity, for light. She found none. Thus, Helen found herself sacrificing her own heart for the sake of Miss Betty’s. But only temporarily. She made that fact clear and known.

“Miss Betty, I know how crazy you is about Mary Agnes. I know what you done lost. I ain’t on my feet yet, no how. So I figure, for the time being, it’s best that Mary Agnes stay put.”

Betty, whom Helen had never known to weep, had, these past few days, wept more times than she could count. Only now it was for life, not death. The budding blossom of Mary Agnes. Her lily that Helen had chosen not to uproot. She grabbed Helen and pulled her to her, squeezed her.

“You don’t know how grateful I am. And you can rest assured that long as she’s in my care, you ain’t got nothing to worry about. Me and Mary Agnes is two peas in a pod. Even when Buck was here, was living, it was mostly just me and her. I done grown so attach.”

“I know, Miss Betty, but I’m coming back for my daughter when the time is right, soon as I get my own spot and get things in order.”

“Honey, you could get your life in order right here. You could find you another job. I heard Miss Perkinson is looking for somebody to do a lil washing and ironing. It could be the three of us—you, me, and the baby. Wouldn’t nobody have to go nowhere.”

Helen heard the pleading in her voice, saw it in her shifting eyes that now glimmered. Betty wrung her hands nervously, anxiously. The modest proposal nearly broke her. But she held onto resolve.

“No, Miss Betty, there’s a life for me beyond this hill, these woods, and I got to make a way for myself.”

Betty slowly nodded. “Alright. But if things don’t pan out, ain’t what you thought, remember—you always got a home in Cartersville, Virginia.”

They hugged. Helen kissed Mary Agnes, squeezed her, and, as she turned away, tears streamed. But she did not look back. Each step was painstaking.

She could not look back.

Chapter Fourteen

Corrine, upon first glance of a stoplight and the increase of motorcars, expressed her relief. “Thank God. Goodbye cow manure and outhouses. Hello, home. Couldn’t nothing make me go back—except a wedding or another funeral.”

Helen was not so jubilant, but she was hopeful. With Mary Agnes at the forefront of her thoughts, she was anxious to get started on the climb upward. She knew rocky terrain lay ahead. But she didn’t expect it quite so soon.

Clumpa-clump.

Corrine lifted her head. “What was that?”

The car pattered, putt--.

Steam hissed.

They waited for a few hours and finally somebody got word to Lil Red—Corrine had insisted that he was the right man to call. He told her that he would catch a few buses and be there as soon as he could. When he arrived, he spoke to the women but quickly directed his attention to the matter at hand. He lifted the hood, touched here, twisted there, and then shook his head. .

“How you travel all them miles and not think to change the oil?” He was direct, but he had to be. This here mess was on account of foolishness. “People need water. A car needs oil. The

heart is the engine and this thing done had a heart attack.” He slowly let down the hood. “You just as well bury it or get a new motor for it.” Like a doctor pulling the sheet, he hung his head.

“Ain’t nothing I can do.”

“How much a motor cost?” Helen asked.

Lil Red didn’t rightly know, but he guessed. “About fifteen dollars.”

Fifteen dollars! Helen didn’t have fifteen cents. And so after burying Buck, she was now facing burying Buck’s motorcar. She had never owned the motorcar, anyway. It was Buck’s and she had taken it, in the middle of the night, like a thief. She wasn’t even certain if he had finished making the proper payments. Possession without penalty. Well, not quite, being that the car was now nearly worthless—or at least it was to Helen. Unfinished business. Loose ends. She had left Buck without the proper goodbye—as he had done her. The least she could do was bid farewell to his tin lizzie. She waved to it.

Lil Red suggested that being that they hadn’t even gotten off the road and settled, they wait for him at the Colored café up the corner, while he went to fetch somebody’s car. Helen knew Corrine was tired, frustrated. And fatigue made her susceptible to annoyance. She would consider Helen’s conversation an affront to her peace of mind. So while Corrine smoked, Helen kept quiet. She nibbled her danish and sipped coffee. Peered out the window for Lil Red and wondered-- What sort of man was he? The kind who showed up when you called? The kind who made promises and kept them? He kept this one. He had gone to Grover’s, pleaded his case and Grover had loaned him a good one—Model A. Next thing, he pulled to the curb, opened the trunk, gathered their bags and loaded them.

Helen was glad to rest, to unpack, to get settled in. That's why she was startled by the first knock on the door, and ten minutes later, the second knock. Before long, the little apartment was full of people. Corrine hadn't mentioned company—or cards. If she had, it had slipped Helen's mind. The small apartment soon brimmed with raucous laughter.

“Fool, you cheating!”

“No, I ain't. You just mad cause I'm swinging you by the tail!”

They played for matches, not money. Shoving small, red-tipped sticks from one end of the table to the other. Trying to acquire a heap.

Simple's winnings evoked envy and insult. Sharp words were hurled.

“Simple, where's that bean pole? She coming to drag you out of here like she done at the dive the other night?”

As usual, Simple had no answer. Embarrassed, he smiled, looked sheepishly to Corrine, who noted a black hole where one of his brown eye teeth had dangled.

Rumor had it, when he returned to work with a scratched face and black eye, that he and his woman had argued fiercely all the way home, that, stepping into the confines of their own walls, they had fought like men, turning over tables, breaking dishes. He bore all the signs of love gone bad.

No matter what had occurred, evidently Simple had not been deterred. He emerged scratched, his shirt torn, his pride bruised, but his passion for Corrine unscathed. He sipped from his hip-flask, and the way he was smiling now, his battles were a thing of the past. He reached out to touch what was in his present and within his grasp—the curve of Corrine's breast.

The slap echoed. Chaos emerged.

Lil Red kept a steady eye on Helen. It came close to the end of the evening—the last round of drinks. Helen stood at the kitchen sink, stabbing at ice with a small fork. She squinted to block flying chips. Lil Red handed his cards to Squirrel to play one hand while he played another. He snuck up behind her, startled her. She jumped.

“I ain’t mean to scare you. I—I was wondering if I could talk to you.”

Helen was filling the bowl with ice. “About what?” She stopped, waited.

“About you going out with me tomorrow night.”

Helen stopped what she was doing. She wondered if she had heard right, but was afraid to ask.

Lil Red leaned in closer. “Did you hear me?” The drinks had made his tongue looser, had given him courage.

“Yes, I heard you.” Helen sighed. “You know I just come from burying my husband down in Virginia, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I heard. And that’s why I am asking you out. With everything you been through, I thought maybe I could show you a good time.”

Helen gazed at him and got lost in those baby blues of his. Before she realized it, “yes” came out of her mouth.

The next morning Corrine dragged Helen to The Hair Net in preparation for her date. “God gave you a head full of hair, so you just as well as use it to your advantage.”

The little bell over the door jingled as the two stepped inside. Helen eyed the long row of chairs on the adjacent wall, all filled. Some were tucked under dryers, legs crossed, flipping through a magazine. Some lay for a hearty shampoo, some sat upright in front of a mirror that stretched the length of the room, covered necks bent for beauty.

Corrine marched straight over to Junie, whispered in his ear. He held the curling iron still with one hand, perched the other on his narrow hip.

“Turn around, honey.” He paused to assess. “She can take your spot. But she got a mane. I’m gon have to charge more.”

His hands were rough on her scalp, yet light and efficient as he laid her hair in place. Oiled. Shiny. Beautiful.

She sat at the front window for half an hour peering down into the street, waiting for the first glimpse of Lil Red. She had never dated beyond the boundaries of her Papa’s front porch, her front yard, under the watchful eye of her mother, who would periodically peep outside through the window at her. Every love tap, every tender word had to be quick, stolen. Nothing much changed—she still felt like a little girl doing something she had no business. But then again, everything had changed—she was a woman and she was widowed, free. She ran her hand over her long, billowing skirt and fingered the dainty jewelry she had borrowed from Corrine’s box.

“Where’s he taking you?” asked Corrine. She was sitting in the corner by the radio, filing her nails.

“I don’t know. He said maybe to a picture show,” Helen responded.

“You ain’t never been to one, have you?”

“No, I ain’t never been much of nowhere.”

“You gon love it—you’ll see.”

Corrine was right. But it wasn’t the big silver screen or glitz and glamour of actors. It was Lil Red’s sweet cologne, his salient profile, and large hands. She gazed at them as he passed popcorn to her.

“No, thank you.”

She couldn’t eat. She could only stare at Greta Garbo and think about Lil Red, about this, her first real date, about her wings fluttering.

Without haste, he dropped her home. No kiss goodnight, not even a handshake. Helen tried not to worry, so she tried to reason this through—maybe he didn’t want to seem forward, or maybe he was second guessing his interest in her...or maybe he had already decided that he didn’t want her at all. Stepping inside the apartment, she sighed heavily. Corrine was waiting on the pull-out couch.

“Well?” she asked.

“Well what?” Helen took off her coat and scarf and hung them on the rack.

“Don’t ‘well what’ me. Fill me in.”

“It was nice. He was a gentleman.”

And that was it because that was the truth.

On the second date, the truth was not so simple. Helen discovered a few of Lil Red's secrets... and that he was far from innocent.

"Where did you grow up?" she asked.

"Right here in Harlem, didn't leave till I was eighteen, stepped right off these streets and onto a train and then a boat, shipped to France, to the Colored troops. Fighting for white man's issues, when, here at home, won't nobody fighting for Negroes."

"You come from a big family?"

"Yeah, a heap of brothers and sisters and no daddy...so that made me, the oldest, the man of the house...I don't ever remember being a boy, to tell you the truth. Seem like I was always looking out for everybody, had to keep house when my mama was out drinking and trying to find herself a man."

"What did you do before you got drafted?"

"Mostly shined shoes and bused tables...dead end jobs... I thought at least in the military, I could be somebody."

"How did you do as a soldier?" Helen asked.

"Pretty damn good—I ended up serving as a mechanic—worked on airplane engines and kept them running, got good experience. That's how, when I came home, I landed a decent job at Grover's Garage. I was damn good there, too—but my stint there turned out to be short-lived. A white boy showed up—the man's nephew—and I had to go." He sighed, sipped from his glass of whiskey. "Grover told me to check back—to keep in touch."

Helen could see the disappointment rise in him. It seeped through him, into the air, and surrounded their table in the form of a dark cloud.

“I couldn’t find work for months after that,” he continued. “So I started getting into stuff I had no business, passing the time by hanging out on street corners and shooting craps.” Before he realized it, the full truth had slipped out. “That’s why my wife left me.”

“Wife?” Helen uttered.

He looked at her earnestly. “Yeah, my wife. I got married young, at sixteen, but, to be honest, I won’t much of a man then. When she got word that I was doing more on the streets than gambling, she packed my bags and put me out that same day. I didn’t even argue with her. At that point in my life, I really couldn’t wrap my brain around what would make a man want to tie himself down, pay bills and take care of babies. That is,” he added, “until now, until I met you.”

Helen blushed, stopped chewing, looked away.

“Until your sister brought you to the joint that night. Meeting you has made me want to rethink some things. I ain’t been thinking this much since I was locked up in a cold cell.”

“Locked up?” This was more than Helen had bargained for.

Lil Red shrugged, sighed. “Yeah. I had a lot of anger inside of me. But I had kept it bottled up for years. It was bound to come out, and it did...really bad one night when some fool accused me of staring at his woman and shoved me to the wall. I pushed back and to tell you the truth, I don’t even remember beating him. Next thing I know there was the police with night sticks and they took me away in a paddy wagon.”

“How long were you locked up?” Helen had suddenly found herself sitting across the table from a criminal.

“Thirty days, but I do believe them thirty days saved my life. That cold, hard cell was a wake-up call. I always remembered, no matter what went down, to keep a lid on it after that. I keep quiet most times, stand on the outside looking in.”

“I don’t let nobody in my head, in my thoughts, Helen, so I hope you know what tonight means to me. I want to show you something different, that’s why I took you farther out—to The Red Roof—some place special.

Helen admitted to herself that the place was indeed classy. There was a live performance here—a pianist, soft lights. Noise here was rustling, flowing, not broken and choppy. There was the clink of glasses and the drum of light conversation. When they first entered and sat down, the mood had been light. She had mulled over the menu—hog jowls or baked ham. Now there was so much more to mull over.”

There was silence. Lil Red continued.

“Helen, you ain’t done much talking yet. But it’s a good feeling that flows between us, even when we ain’t talking. You know what I’m saying?”

Helen had known good and easy silence. She thought of Miss Betty. How they’d be sitting in the kitchen, no noise, but the air was warm.

Helen stared at him a moment. “What’s else is on your mind, Lil Red?”

“Now that I think about it, you ain’t told me nothing about yourself. I don’t know a thing about you—except you come from Virginia looking for work. Is that the only reason you left Virginia?”

Helen didn’t want to drudge up Buck. Not now.

He took a quick swig from his glass to get his tongue moving. “Maybe you don’t want to get involved with someone with a track record like mine.”

Her rocky marriage to Buck. Lil Red’s bad one, too. The aroma from her plate jarred her senses, but now she wasn’t hungry. She rearranged greens beans, smoothed mashed potatoes.

Helen lifted her attention to loud laughter and a voice that sounded familiar several tables over. A man reached across the table to caress his companion’s hand. The woman smiled back at him. The man felt Helen’s intrusive stare, looked over at her. It was James. His smile quickly dropped but he picked it back up and pasted it hastily. It was strained, tight with guilt. Helen coolly nodded at him.

“Who’s that?” asked Lil Red.

“James.”

“The same James that Corrine be hollering about?”

“Yeah.”

“Looks like ole James got a side-kick.”

Helen glared at her sister’s knight in shining armor. He was standing behind the woman, pulling out her chair, helping her into her coat. He ushered her out with his hand at her back.

Lil Red’s devotion, or lack thereof, was no longer Helen’s focus. She now worried about Corrine, wondered if she should reveal what she had seen. Certainly, Corrine would be devastated. Perhaps, she would distort her anger, direct it toward Helen, or worse, accuse her of lying. With all these worries weighing her down, there was no time for a mushy goodbye. She insisted that she and Lil Red depart at the curb. She climbed the stairs and approached the apartment with an overwhelming sense of dread.

Entering, Helen kept her eyes glued to the floor, as Corrine played hit or miss with the broom. The click of Helen's high-heeled shoes scratched hardwood from the hall to the kitchen. Corrine held the broom in place, looked to Helen questioningly, resumed sweeping until curiosity won over. "Where'd he take you this time?"

"I ain't pay no attention to the name of the place but it was nice."

"Just nice?"

"Yeah." Helen went into the bathroom, splashed her face, lingered. She tipped to the pull-out couch, changed into her nightclothes. Corrine was watching her from the kitchen.

"Everything all right?" she asked.

"No, things ain't all right. Tonight, when I was with Lil Red, I seen James with another woman."

"Say what?" Corrine let out a sharp, incredulous laugh.

"It was sure enough James. We looked each other dead in the eye."

"Okay, it was James. But maybe the woman with him was his cousin, or"—she groped for an explanation that defied her better judgment—"his sister. He got a sister, you know."

"They won't kin, believe me."

Corrine's raw hurt turned to anger, not at the guilty, James, but at the messenger, her sister.

"Well, ain't this grand? You waltzing in here, telling me how no-good my man is when the reason you're here in the first place was on account of your own no good man."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

Corrine left the broom for something noisier. She started slamming pots and cabinet doors. She fought tears, let anger arise.

That night Helen lay in bed, limp, staring up at the water-stained ceiling. She had figured her sister would lash out at her, but she didn't quite expect she would do so with a serpent's tongue.

The next morning the air had grown thick with resentment, at least on Corrine's part. Each woman looked and listened for the other and got her turn in the bathroom and the kitchen when the other was out. The front door shut and two minutes later, shut again, as though two different spheres had inadvertently crossed the same plane and were trying in desperation to steer clear of each other. This went on for days.

Corrine's silence prompted Helen to avoid her. After work Helen dragged herself down sidewalks and streets, looking for a refuge. She stopped in stores that before would not have interested her in the least. A pawn shop. No, she didn't need no help. She had no money, nothing of value, except the plain band that sentimentality had kept glued to her finger. Even if she had money she wouldn't spend it here, not on these trinkets. Behind the counter, the man flared his impatience by noisily ignoring her.

Next, the Colored café. She sipped from a chipped china cup long after she had emptied it. Respectably waiting for a phantom until the clean-up boy started sweeping under her table and over her feet.

Then off to the museum, where Colored heart and soul takes form in bold colors and shapes. Here she could go unnoticed for hours, merge into the atmosphere of thoughtful observation and quiet whispers.

She stumbled into a voodoo shop that sent a shiver through her, one that she dismissed as reaction to the biting wind. Dimly lit by the flicker of candles, a black cloth covered another entrance—a doorway separating waiting customers from the one being served up with a remedy to fix, or possibly eliminate, the problem. She wondered if there were a kindness potion that she could slip into Corrine’s morning coffee, or a faithful pill that she could slip into James’ drink but she didn’t hang around to ask.

By accident she ended up on Hundley. When she peered up at the rusty green and white street sign, she surmised that a force stronger than she had led her there. That’s what she believed, rapping on Hazel Belle’s door. It took Hazel Belle a while to answer. When she did, she hugged Helen, but Helen held back, for now she was cautious of warm hugs that could turn cold in an instant. Hazel Belle pulled Helen inside, told her to have a seat.

Helen looked around. Hazel Belle was quite the homemaker. She had hung curtains and art. Facsimiles of the pictures she had stood studying at the museum. But she was doing far more than keeping house. In the far corner a console stacked with magazines, table scattered with open books, loose papers, a fountain pen, a plant stand holding a radio that softly hummed jazz to stimulate concentration. She was thinking, doing. Helen felt intrusive for disturbing Hazel Belle who was clearly busy. So she sat quietly, watching Hazel Belle’s animation over books and authors and poets and the Speaker’s Corner and Marcus Garvey. And other such things that if Helen had heard of them, she knew nothing about them. One thing Hazel Belle hadn’t learned from a book, but from her mother, nearly illiterate, was how to carry a one-sided conversation. But eventually there was nothing left for Hazel Belle to do but ask the obvious.

“So what brought you?”

“I was walking the streets.”

Hazel Belle frowned. “I thought you said you was doing maid’s work.”

Helen laughed. “I said walking the streets, not street walking I’m still a maid.”

“Good. I mean kind of good. You thought of doing anything else?”

“Not really. I’m not like you, Hazel Belle. You cut from a different mold.”

“How so?”

“You’re smart. You got big ideas.”

“I’m no smarter than anybody else. I just try harder is all. That’s what makes the difference. When I first got to the city, I was worse off than you. I didn’t have anybody to stay with. I worked as a maid on the night shift, cleaning up a big office building in West Manhattan. When I was done working, I never left the building. I slept in a broom closet till morning. Then I crept out before the businessmen arrived.”

“What’d you do during the day?”

“Stayed in the library, mostly. Seemed like I read every book--fiction and nonfiction, biography and autobiography, even magazines. I did that for two months till I saved enough to get a little rat trap room. It was ten times worse than this.”

“Did you quit the night shift?”

“No. I kept that job for two years. Started going to school in the day.”

“When did you sleep?”

“Cat nap took on a whole new meaning. So did beans—pinto, kidney, lima. That’s all I could afford.”

“I guess I ain’t got it so bad. At least I got a place to stay. Or at least I had one.”

“What happened?”

“She don’t want me there.”

“Sure, she does. Y’all are sisters. Can’t nothing come against that.”

“Nothing but a man.”

“Honey, you’re not chasing after your sister’s man, are you? The city is big. There’s plenty men to go around.”

Helen was half smiling, half tearing up. “I don’t want Corrine’s man. I seen her man with another woman and I told her about it and now she can’t stand me.”

“There’s no guarantee on a man but sisters are forever. Corrine is just hurt is all. She’ll come around. But if she doesn’t, you know where I live. You’re welcome to stay here. I meant what I said at Mama’s. We’re still family.”

Helen had thought family meant something. Counted for something. She was not connected by blood to Hazel Belle. Yet she was showing more kindness and compassion than Corrine had in weeks. She may have been her little sister, but she was not a child, and had done nothing wrong. It was time to face conflict. She headed back to Corrine’s.

Lil Red was waiting for her on the steps. By the time she realized this, there was no way she could avoid him. She wasn’t certain why turning from him was her first instinct, then she remembered. His checkered past. The ex-wife and jail. And what else was there to find out? She didn’t want to know.

“I been looking for you for over a week. Corrine say she ain’t seen you.”

“I ain’t been coming in till late at night and leaving early in the morning.”

“I thought maybe you was avoiding me.”

“I don’t have no reason to do that,” she lied.

Lil Red started to speak again, but hesitated. He looked down at his shoes as he spoke. “You’re probably too tired to walk with me down to Louie’s Soul Food, huh? Or you probably done had your dinner.”

Actually, she hadn’t eaten. She’d forgotten about food.

“That’d be fine.”

Dinner was awkward, but somehow nice. Lil Red suggested they take the long way. They strolled as closely as they could without Lil Red taking the liberty of putting his arm around her shoulders. When Helen spoke, she knew that Lil Red was watching her intensely. It made her uneasy, in a way that she remembered feeling about Buck, when he had first tried to woo her. She was glad that the street had grown dark—she felt freer. She let herself smile at Lil Red’s jokes and was bolder, asking him more serious questions.

“What was it like over in France?”

“Their dirt is hard and brown like ours. That’s mostly the only thing I seen—in dug holes. We was shuttled off to fight alongside the French. We won’t good enough, even in foreign land, to lay or to stand next to a white American.”

“Did the French treat Colored any different?”

“They treated a man like a man, no matter his skin color. I almost forgot about black and white till I came back here and was reminded of it. But enough about me. What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You ain’t never said why you left Virginia.”

Helen’s stomach tightened and her step quickened. She was glad, when she looked up, that they were standing in front of Corrine’s apartment building. Confronting Corrine, instead of divulging her past, was now the better option. They parted with a kiss on the cheek.

Helen noticed that Corrine leapt at the sound of the door opening. Helen was coming in earlier than usual and had caught her sister off guard. Corrine was bending to wipe dust off the coffee table with the palm of her hand.

“Hey.” It was the first word spoken by either of them for quite some time.

Helen started shedding herself of layers of clothing. She reached under the couch for her robe. She wanted to busy herself, but there was nothing to do but face the matter at hand. They stood in an awkward moment that passed slowly. Corrine swallowed the lump in her throat.

“It won’t your fault bout James. I called him up and told him where to go—lying, two bit...anyhow, I was wrong to blame you”—a tear welled and rolled—“to treat you like that.”

Helen nodded, relieved. The ton of insurmountable hurt had been lifted. Helen reached out and two hugged. They both sat down. Corrine kicked up her feet, pulled out a cigarette. From an outsider’s view, their postures, their expressions were familiar, comfortable. Yet something thin, obscure, indistinguishable positioned itself between them and Helen did not feel free to discuss Lil Red and her growing interest in him. She could not divulge the spark that she had felt sitting across from him in the diner or how his deep voice lulled her, nearly mesmerized her. Perhaps, the open wound of disappointment could evoke feelings of jealousy for the pinch of happiness and hope Helen was feeling, both of which had been stripped from her sister. She did not mention having stopped by Hazel Belle’s, for fear that Corrine could resent her for seeking the friendship and kindness of someone other than herself. And so, they sat, saying bits of things that amounted to much of nothing and shortly thereafter both retired to bed, the fire squelched, but smoldering.

Chapter Fourteen

The next evening Helen once again found herself at Hazel Belle's doorstep. Her sister-in-law's smile lit up the dark hallway. She wanted to discuss Lil Red, which could be awkward. What if Hazel Belle thought ill of her, eyeing a man so soon after Buck's death. The thought of Buck led her to Sammy Nash. And she settled there. It was safer for her, yet a dangerous topic for Hazel Belle. She mentioned his name casually, and Hazel Belle, generally relaxed, stiffened.

"I seen the way you looked at him when he was at Miss Betty's," she said.

"That was a shared moment of grief."

"You sure it won't something else?"

Hazel Belle knew it was more, but there are some matters that outweigh the importance of love, make it seem like a frivolity, even. Like self-improvement, and an education. Neither of which Sammy possessed much interest in.

"I'm sure of one thing—it's hard for a Colored woman to beat the streets."

"Corrine never talked much about the streets," Helen offered. "Mostly about a man. I suppose she sees getting a man as a way to beat the streets."

Hazel Belle shook her head. "Women worry too much about a man and not enough about themselves. They need to be self-reliant."

Hazel Belle was using fancy words. Helen thought of the rows of fancy books in the Caldwood's library. She had flipped through them. Unable to read most of the words, she had put them back and resigned herself to simply dusting them.

“You give any thought to what I said—about schooling?”

Now the conversation was safe for Hazel Belle, perilous for Helen, who found herself stumbling over her words and shortly after stumbling out of there. But determination planted itself in her--she would pick up another book in the library and see if she could make sense of it.

Mrs. Caldwood was off to a charity function. And Mr.Caldwood was gone for the week on a business convention. The house was still. While dinner simmered, Helen crept into the library. The room, with its high-back wing chairs, busts, and lion head statues, was too formal. She felt out of place. This was a respite for pipe-smoking, vest-wearing scholars. Not for one who had scraped by in a one-room schoolhouse. She scanned the titles and authors for one that aroused interest: Shakespeare—Keats—Sir Walter Scott—Oliver Goldsmith--Dickens. She backtracked. The title—Great Expectations-- bore some interest—reminded her of Hazel Belle’s drive and in a small degree, her own. She took the book, sought out the most inviting, comfortable spot in the house—the couple’s bathroom, and then settled, fully clothed, shoes off, inside their claw-foot, white porcelain bathtub. This was indeed risky, decadent behavior. But who would know of her liberties? In the cramped space, she twisted her shoulders, arched her legs, and lay the leather bound novel on her knees. An hour passed. She had forgotten about the lamb chops. The barking poodle and the voice of the lady of the house startled her. She quickly leapt from the tub and looked down at the book as though it were a stolen jewel. She slipped into a guest bedroom, one that, except for collecting dust, had no other apparent use, and laid the book underneath a pillow sham. She hurried to the steps, gathered her breath, and then traipsed calmly, dust cloth in hand, to tend to dinner.

While sitting at the bus stop, Helen noticed a sign on a nearby post: Apartment for rent. Clean. Cheap. 133rd St. Only three blocks from Corrine, this meant a building that was old, its rooms dark, windows, small. Roaches, definitely. A mouse, perhaps. She took the sign as a “sign,” dropped off her clothes, and caught the trolley.

As expected, the building was in poor condition. Still, the determining factor would be the rent. A low voltage bulb hung from the ceiling, bestowing a pinch of light in the hall. Another handwritten sign taped directly above a row of mailboxes indicated the apartment number. 1-A. Good—first floor. She wouldn’t have to endure another spooky, dank stairwell. She knocked on the first door, hoping this was the Super’s or someone who could tell which was the Super’s. A squat, balding man in overalls answered.

“I come to see bout the vacancy,” she said.

“Okay, just a minute.”

He left the door partly open. Helen watched him fumble at his desk, rifling through a full drawer. He pulled out a flashlight and a large ring that jingled keys. He led her down the hallway to the end, fifth door on the right.

Clean meant empty. A fetid smell of garbage, plaster and dust filled the small space. Nothing ammonia couldn’t kill. The Super handed her the flashlight. She noted dust balls in every corner, walls marked with scuffs and scrapes, and, in the kitchen, which was closet-sized, appliances rusted and battered. The bathroom was a hole in the wall. Just like Corrine’s place. Just like Hazel Belle’s. She turned to him.

“How much?”

“Ten dollars a month.”

“I’ll take it.”

A sense of excitement rose in Helen. It started in her little toe and worked itself through her, finding its way to her heart. The arteries there pumped harder, faster, filling her lungs with optimism. She exhaled the newness of a brand new day, morning, though, in reality, the skies were dimming to evening. Dusk descended upon the street, people shuffled to their usual respites—corners, steps, and benches—before they retired to the confinement of their own walls. Corrine was likely home by now. Probably sitting and waiting for life to hand her her piece of the pie. All she had gotten so far were crumbs. It was a good thing that she had never done maid's work. For her, witnessing the luxuries whites so generously bestowed upon themselves without a thought or a care—for they were deserving—would sicken her, make her hate her own pittance worse than she did, make her long for the abundance that never allows a good time to end. Maid's work—inside rich walls-- it would be right there in front of her—where she could reach out and touch it, but never grasp it, take it with her.

Yes, Corrine's heart was prone to envy, and this had drawn a wedge between the two sisters for quite some time. Corrine secretly wished for a man such as Lil Red, one who looked to her with adoring eyes, one who gave willingly with no outward demands or expectations of recompense. And why was Helen reading so much nowadays? Too engrossed to begin dinner, and, if she did, sometimes it was burnt, or worse, undercooked. Corrine never stopped to think about Simple, who saw in her what he had seen in no other woman, who couldn't give her material things, just his whole heart, pure and simple. What Corrine wanted was not Simple, but simple--she wanted a man to give her both—riches and his love, for, to her, one was worth just as much as the other.

Helen entered. She had to break the news to Corrine that she was leaving. She'd found, from experience, that blurting things out didn't work best with her sister. She would have to

ease it on her, gently. Mrs. Caldwood had given her two silk blouses that she had grown tired of. Helen held one out to her sister.

“Where this come from?”

“The white woman I work for.”

Corrine examined the blouse, pleased. Helen’s confidence in the outcome of the evening lifted. She went into the kitchen, examined the ice box for a meal, quick, yet satisfying. She decided to slice the butt of leftover baked chicken to make stew. While it simmered, she would maybe do Corrine’s hair, grease her scalp good, braid it up nice, break her resistance with some good, old fashioned love.

Surprisingly, the evening had gone well. Corrine said she enjoyed the stew, and she complimented the new hairdo. Helen called her from the living room, and the two sat, as usual, side by side, the silence comfortable, the moment seasoned and ready.

“I was waiting for the bus today and by chance come across a sign.”

“What kind of sign?”

“A sign about an apartment for rent.”

“Oh yeah?” A hint of disappointment tinged Corrine’s voice.

“I went and looked at it. The man said ten dollars. I think I can swing that.”

Now the silence wasn’t so easy. Corrine tried to be big. Tried to. But her voice was small. “That’s nice.”

Mrs. Hopkins was peering out of her first floor window when Helen, carrying two hefty bags, dropped one of them. Grapefruits rolled down the sidewalk, a milk bottle burst. The woman opened the window and called out.

“Need some help?”

“No, ma’am.”

Old people have slow limbs and dull ears. Mrs. Hopkins proved the latter true, the former false. The next thing Helen knew, she was guiding the spilt contents with her cane back to Helen’s feet.

“You just moved in?” she asked.

“Yes.” Helen now held one bulging bag.

The woman crept alongside Helen.

“Where you from?”

“A few blocks over—Creighton.”

“Creighton look just about the same as this.”

Helen’s apartment was empty, the walls bare. She would have to fill it piece by piece. She had fifteen dollars in savings. She would use ten of it to buy a secondhand bed.

Two weeks passed and Helen received an invitation.

Mrs. Hopkins cracked her door just as Helen was opening hers.

“Just took a pie out the oven. Come on over.”

Flaky, warm, sweet. Like Miss Betty’s. Her place, cluttered with hodgepodge furniture and family photographs, exuded the same welcoming atmosphere. Mrs. Hopkins was quite a talker. And though Helen didn’t contribute much to the conversation, she could have. For this was a place to ask questions. Questions that had never been formed with words, only thoughts that evolved into feelings that resulted in action. Action that you sometimes regretted, often second guessed. She stirred her thoughts in the form of sugar and watched them dissolve in her coffee, holding her tongue, listening.

“You know, when I first seen you walking with all them groceries, you put me in mind of myself.”

“How so?”

“I just had a feeling that you done hit some rough spots but you still try to make do.”

“How you know all that from me dropping groceries?”

“Old folks know more than what they can see with the naked eye,” she said.

Helen knew that in Mrs. Hopkins she had found a kindred spirit. Like this woman, so many spirits had come and gone from her—young and old, kin and friend--stolen by death or circumstance. She was glad that here and now, sitting right across from her, she had someone to talk to. She smiled at her newfound friend, and before long, out came the stories of her past. Actually, only a few.

She couldn't divulge her life in one sitting, nor would it be possible to, anyway, for Mrs. Hopkins was quite loquacious. Her stories made Helen want to keep visiting, keep listening, and the food was an extra incentive. Good, down home cooking had, since she had arrived, come only from her toil--she was glad to sit down and enjoy someone else's effort, not in a restaurant or a café, but at the most intimate spot—a kitchen table.

Helen cold tell that Mrs. Hopkins was definitely Southern, not just by her accent, but by her sense of hospitality, by the slow and easy way she laughed. It was a laugh that revealed that she had known the laborious sweat of fields but also the lazy days of lemonade and watermelon and banjo playing, that she had eaten warm, mushy strawberries fresh from the ground, had drunk cool river water, and run barefoot on hot, grassy land. Yes, she laughed like she had known a bit of sunshine. But also a lot of rain. Helen wanted to know it all.

“Mrs. Hopkins, I sure wouldn’t mind hearing more about you.” Helen hoped this would get her going and it did. From her mind’s scrapbook, Mrs. Hopkins seemed to pick a photo that conjured a smile.

“Well, honey, if I had to start my story, I would have to tell you about my husband, Elroy James Hopkins, III, because that’s where everything begins—with a little bit of love.”

...They met at a barn square dance. He was from a plantation a few miles over where, for six generations, his family sharecropped. She, from a similar lot. Her father, who regarded his youngest daughter as the last lily of the valley, said ‘no’ the first six times she asked to go. The next would warrant either a slap or concession. She took her chances.

She didn’t have a nice dress or shoes—just a few burlap frocks and there wasn’t time, or material, to sew a new one... and shoes cost a good two dollars. She had no choice but to come in a floppy old rag that was her sister’s hand-me-down. She stepped in barefoot, her soles as coarse as a mule’s hide, and her hands, too. She worked as hard as a man—baling hay and pulling thick potatoes from unrelenting soil, and she was never allowed idle time—not with them owing the Mister (some still said Massa) so much for last year’s fruitless crops—damn boll weevil. Naturally, she took full advantage of this occasion of leisure. She lifted the hem of that raggedy dress and stomped her hooved calves on the hard dirt floor. She clapped and laughed and was having a good ole time. Their eyes—hers and Elroy’s—met at the same moment. The twinkling stars of the clear black sky were no match for the glimmer here. She stopped mid-motion, but resumed with haste—eyeing him.

Elroy. Elroy. Once she learned his name, she couldn’t stop singing it. There was music all around her. The morning birds. The night crickets. Elroy. Elroy. Two weeks later she lay

down out back of a deserted barn not far from her folks' shack. She rocked to the rhythm—the fever was all around. “Elroy!” she hollered out.

“What the hell!” her daddy cried. God knows, he had tried to shield his daughter from swine such as this. And here she lay—casting her jewels like some—“Whore!” he hollered in fury, ripping off his long leather belt and lashing her hide with it. He only managed to get in a good lick or two before she scampered away in shame, her clothes bunched over her young breasts. Elroy was already off and running. Luckily, her father hadn't gotten a good look at him—his ashy black ass had blocked the view.

This was a good point to stop for this first visit—a suspenseful spot where Mrs. Hopkins—then known only as Janie Q—had gotten herself in a fine pickle of a mess. No matter how she tossed it, this long-ago predicament, however embarrassing, was still sunshine. It led to running away and jumping on the last car of a midnight train. It was dark and they didn't know where they were headed and they didn't care—they had each other. Nothing else but the clothes on their backs and a few pennies in their pockets—but enough love to fill the whole world.

Yes, indeed, in her scrapbook, the faded black-and-white photo to Janie Q and Elroy James Hopkins—young and bold, staring life in the face cock-eyed—stirred the blood in that battered heart of hers. Done with the animation that must accompany effective storytelling, she twisted her gnarled hands and placed them in her lap. Helen had grown comfortable, but she reluctantly lifted herself. It was getting late and she had to get back to the Underwood and to practicing away at tapping keys.

Mrs. Caldwood offered Helen the guest bedroom and a new position—live-in maid. Six days a week, same pay. She told Helen that she had never had a worker as industrious and

amiable. And Helen had thanked her—by not only turning down her offer, but by turning in her two weeks' notice.

"I'm sorry, Miss Caldwood—you been awfully good, but I found something closer to where I live and where I am trying to go to school." Mrs. Caldwood folded her lips, shook her head, said nothing, and Helen knew that this woman wasn't the least bit pleased. But she had already apologized once, and once was enough.

Helen realized, right at that moment, that times were changing. She thought of the tales of Miss Betty and Mrs. Hopkins—their loved ones screaming out in helpless terror, their fates controlled by the diabolical whims of their white master. There were still losses—like Buck—but they occurred less. To survive—no, to thrive—you had to be wise, play your hand shrewdly, strategize. That was the only way for a Colored person to get ahead.

And so quietly, Helen had set plans in motion, securing a job near Fifth Avenue at the Winthrop's. Closer to her apartment and to typing school. She could leave one spot and get to another in fifteen minutes. Yet for all intents and purposes, Helen, no matter her occupation, would always be a Southern maid—a hard worker, a good cook, but, now, not quite so loyal. Mammies were a dying breed.

The Winthrop's was more luxurious than she had imagined. Unlike the Caldwood's, the grandiose property with grounds and a guest house required a full staff—a gardener, a butler, a chauffeur, a cook, and, of course, a maid. There were positives to this. Best of all, Helen's workload had been lessened. The multitude of duties and responsibilities had been evenly distributed and divided. To her dismay, she quickly realized the negative. There were eyes in

the house, rarely the Winthrop's, but the other workers' who made certain that they were not alone in their diligence.

The gardener, while trimming from a bush in front of the house, happened to be able to see through the window into the living room, where the cook was smoking in Mr. Winthrop's chaise lounge and flipping through a magazine. He reported to the white folks immediately. The next day, the cook left at noon, teary-eyed. Helen, witnessing this from around a corner, was forced to rely on her wits. She figured it best not strike idle conversation with the others. This would deter nosiness. Also, she would vary her routine and time spent on each chore. No one could peg her, no one could find her, unless they buzzed for her. She then quickly found a hiding spot for her most enjoyable leisurely activity--reading. A fourth floor walk-up attic. Her saving grace was, and had always been, her skill. She could get the job done with time to spare.

She had mastered another routine-- darting from one bus to another to arrive on time to typing school. There were weekly tests. Shorthand, typing, and filing. She bought an old Underwood from a second hand shop and practiced pecking. But her scores were still mediocre. She would look over as other brown fingers moved ardently and gracefully, following the typing book perched to the side with proficiency. And the filing. She wasn't so hot with alphabetizing—sorting the sc's from the sm's from the st's. She could do it, but not as quickly as the others. Shorthand was her worst. Perhaps, she lacked skill. Perhaps, she was fooling herself. School cost five dollars a week and she couldn't waste her time or her money. She didn't have enough of either to spread around.

After long evenings she dragged herself home to her tiny apartment, where, even if she played the radio, the silence crept in slowly and fully until it could be heard under the blare.

Loneliness led her to Mrs. Hopkins' door, where the atmosphere was honest and nothing was expected of her, other than good, honest company.

"Come on in."

Mrs. Hopkins was rocking by the window, enjoying the radio.

"Don't you lock your door?"

She shook her head. "No need. When you done seen what I seen, you ain't scared of no man. And I done seen plenty hatefulness, honey."

Helen knew that this was the lead-in to another story. She took her place, like a child, sitting on the floor beside the rocker. Today Mrs. Hopkins would talk about the rain, which was highly appropriate, for it was drizzling outside. She turned off the radio and stared out the window, looking into the past, her past, that revealed the reflection of their firstborn son, Easton. They named him that because that's where the train let off—Easton, Alabama.

They hadn't planned to stay long. A day or two. But life has a way of holding you by the boot straps, if you ain't careful. Janie Q and Elroy, a wild buck and his soon-to-be bride, knew nothing of caution. They were hungry, for food, yes, but mostly for life. And they got a small dose of life, a seed, which began growing in Janie Q's stomach three days after the pit stop and two days after they jumped the broom. That's how they wed. Outside a shack of a general store, there was a broom propped by the door. They stole it—borrowed it—and headed off to a nearby field. They grabbed hands. Elroy looked to Janie Q, good stock, the best poontang, and he uttered those fateful words—not "I, Elroy, do take..." but something less conventional, something like, "Janie Q, girl, you got the good stuff I want. I'm crazy bout you. Can't nobody else have you. If they even look cross-eyed at you, I'll take to their heads and kill em." Janie Q was touched. She smiled hard, all her gritty teeth showed, for she hadn't had a toothbrush in

days. She accepted Elroy's offering of his hand, his life joined with hers, and they turned to the small, tattered broomstick and jumped. So it was official. The next few days they spent raiding apple orchards and smokehouses for food, sleeping in an empty chicken coop, and repeatedly consummating their union.

They arose, dirty, and satisfied. They went to a river, stripped, cleaned themselves off, and went to look for work. Their first stop—Northumberland Manor. Young, able, they were quickly hired. Lord, big dreams can shrink in an instant. They ran from one sharecropping plantation to another and found themselves doing what they had done all their lives. Only now, at least they were happy.

But happiness was a tricky state, for it produced a false sense of security. It is like the air, the wind, elusive, ever changing. The overseer, Richardson, developed an eye for Janie Q that rested on her rounded buttocks as she was bent over pulling and hacking. He spat tobacco, lusted, spat tobacco, and plotted for the opportunity for a taste of the black berry. Some of his cronies had bragged of its sweetness, some scoffed without tasting; to them it was unappetizing, repulsive. To him, it was just damned tempting.

As her belly grew, so did his lust. And his abuse. He allowed her few breaks and little water, even when she complained of thirst and fatigue. And Janie Q was no whiner, nor was she a stranger to labor. Well, at least this kind of labor. As hard as he was on her, he was more merciless to Elroy. Nothing Elroy did suited him. Everything he did annoyed him. No one worked with more force or lent greater production, but, to Richardson, he was shiftless. Jealousy, of course. Inevitably, he took the whip to him, and, as Janie Q watched, her stomach fluttered. This was the first physical sign of life within, and her baby was making the world well aware that it objected to its father's unjust treatment. Then Janie Q felt a pang and hollered out.

Richardson stopped. He perceived her reaction as a deterrent from the matter at hand and he didn't appreciate her interference one bit. He would make her pay.

On the night of a full moon, close to the time Janie Q was about to deliver, Richardson sent Elroy on an errand to a neighboring farm to fetch plowing materials. By foot, it was a good hour's walk, which was just enough time for Richardson to do his deed. When he was certain Elroy was well on his way, he burst in, ripped that flimsy dress clean off her and lapped at lusciousness. She hollered, flung her arms, clawed his face. He fingered the stinging on his cheek. The blood angered him, further enticed him. A sassy wench. He'd teach her how to respect a white man. He punched her, then got on top, holding her down. He thrust and thrust, and Janie Q, her belly big, hollered out for mercy. By the time he had finished, she lay bleeding, her uterus contracting.

The sharecroppers in neighboring shacks were scared to come see about all the racket. But their consciences could stand the wails no longer and finally they rushed in to witness her baby's head at the tip, near life, and Janie Q, drenched, breathless, near death. As they bent to her—somebody rushed for clean rags—Elroy burst in.

Remember what he had vowed in earnest? No one was to lay a finger on Janie Q or by God, he'd kill him. That's what he done. With bare hands, strengthened by fury, he choked the life out of Richardson. Soon there was a warrant for his head. They packed in a fury and left. The baby, weak and frail, named Easton, didn't make it through the train ride to the next stop. They buried him in a field and Janie Q buried a piece of herself right along with him.

Mrs. Hopkins wiped a tear from her eye, and Helen did, too. Helen understood the woman's love for her child that nothing in the world could compare or replace. The old woman

tucked away that scratched photo of Easton in her mind's eye and rocked mindlessly, watching the rain. Helen thought of Betty and the loss of her son. And she thought of Mary Agnes.

Back at home, Helen was in the comforts of her own bed, but she was burdened by Mrs. Hopkins' loss. After hours of tossing and turning, she drifted off to a restless slumber, where Buck appeared to her in a dream. He reached out a bony finger, beckoning her, and opened his mouth to reveal the rot that had replaced whiteness. He tried to speak but was unable. A single tear dripped down his cheek. Helen awoke, afraid and disoriented. She recalled the decay of Buck's once handsome face, which sent her shivering. She considered his expression, his eyes, which somehow calmed her. In her dream, he had been crying. Perhaps he was apologizing for the wrong he had done. Unsettled still, she made her way to her window, sat in a nearby chair, and remained there for the rest of the night, looking to the dark sky, awaiting dawn.

She was pulling a pan out of the oven when she heard a rap at the door. She wasn't expecting company and was surprised to find Lil Red standing in the doorway.

"What wind blew you?" she asked.

She headed back to the kitchen, leaving the door open for him.

He stepped in and waited. She called from the kitchen.

"Have a seat." He settled on the sofa and watched Helen shuffle about. She set the small table for two and directed him to the bathroom.

"You happened to come at a good time. Wash your hands and have a meal with me."

Lil Red did as he was told and took his place at the table. Helen was secretly pleased with herself and her meal--her rolls, fluffy and lightly browned, fried chicken, crisp, yams, and

collards, tender. Lil Red inhaled the aromas and smiled. Helen set down a plate heaped with good food.

“Where you learn to cook like this?”

Helen blushed. “Can’t tell you all my secrets.”

“You ain’t told me none yet.”

She sat across from him at the small table. “If you want to know something, I guess you’d better get to asking.”

“Okay. I got a question for you. If you could have anything in the world, what would it be?”

Helen paused. “My daughter, Mary Agnes.”

Lil Red seemed a bit disappointed. Perhaps, he had hoped that she would confess that he was what she wanted.

“What is it that you want, Lil Red?” she asked.

“Right now, I want some more iced tea, please. After that, I got another answer for you.”

Helen knew what he would say next, and her stomach fluttered. She pushed the pitcher toward him, watch him pour, watched him gulp. Temporarily satisfied, he set down the glass.

“How about I show you what I want,” he said, staring her down.

Helen said nothing. Lil Red rose, reached out to her and led her into the bedroom. Standing by the small bed, he tenderly pressed her down, and she knelt beneath him—yielding. He carefully placed his large frame atop hers, and soon his touch unleashed passions that had been tucked away, buried by hurt and fear. He reached deeper and her wall unraveled in swirls of chiffon—sheer and light—until she was naked. He groped her, caressed her, and she moaned

from longing. Throbbing, he quenched both their thirsts with a throaty kiss, and, with one vigorous thrust, he coasted, waiting for her to catch his rhythm. When she did, they climbed higher and higher until their peak subsided in one gushing wave. They lay quiet. Helen had never laid a finger on a cigarette, but if she had had one now, she would've smoked it—would've inhaled contentedness in long, relaxing puffs.

She had known pleasure, but never peace, at least not for long. What now? Worry began gnawing at her sense of contentment. This man, kind, yet mysterious, had proclaimed his feelings but had stated no promises. Was he holding something back, even now?

Helen looked over at him, tried to read his thoughts as he stared up at the ceiling. Was it disappointment? Regret? He abruptly kissed her forehead, lifted himself, stepped into his clothes and shoes and was buttoning his shirt. Helen was afraid to ask, but, her heart sinking, she had to. She tried not to sound panicked.

“Where you going?”

Lil Red looked to her, absorbing the sight of her lying there, beautiful and good, just as he had imagined—better than he imagined. But he didn't want to say too much, before he knew for sure. Grover had told him to come back the next day to check on the job. If he got on as a mechanic again, he could support Helen and her baby. They could stay in her place awhile, or get one similar, save up, and after a while, move into a house. Have another kid, a couple more, maybe.

He was getting ahead of himself. First things first. The job. The ring.

He shut the front door quietly behind him, not realizing he had never answered Helen's question—simple—“Where you going?”—yet, complex.

Helen dressed slowly, dazed by the residue of their lovemaking. She had been filled in a way that she hadn't been for such a long time, and, instead of focusing on the uncertainty of Lil Red's feelings, about him leaving so abruptly, she enjoyed what had been handed to her for the moment--satisfaction. She couldn't--wouldn't-- admit that she needed him. She traipsed around her sparse apartment. Soon it would be complete, not with furnishings, but with love, with her daughter.

From her window Helen gazed at the children— a cluster of girls chanting, turning a rope rhythmically—and boys—playing makeshift baseball with rags for bases and a stick for a bat—jeering and yelling in boyish banter. True, the streets could be hateful, and certainly ugly, poverty-ridden and overcrowded. But the children—products of fathers who lingered on them, and of mothers who trudged them—they were the silver lining. They grounded you—into convincing yourself they weren't so bad—or into formulating an escape from them.

The cotton-candied smiles, the hop-scotch, and double dutch conjured a vision—a daydream, really—of Mary Agnes...in pink ribbons, pigtails and bobby socks, her little girl stood, wide-eyed, courting the motion of the rope, waiting her turn.

Helen owed her daughter a chance. Glancing at the small metal key on her bureau, the key to her own place, she was proud that she had taken the first step in securing one.

With or without Lil Red she would return for Mary Agnes. A man's love, she had learned, could not be guaranteed. She would not forfeit her child for the prospect of romance. She had come too far.

At that moment, thinking of all she had been through, Helen realized she had had more strength than she realized. She had refused to be beaten.

Her stubbornness reminded her of Buck, and she managed to smile. It was true--pain and grief do diminish, and, over time, are replaced by memories that kindle, instead of cut. She sighed heavily and reached under her bed for the handle of her scratched leather suitcase. Nearly a year ago, she had gripped it in haste, leaving her life behind. Now she would take it to return to her past, to bring her daughter into her present, to live out a future brimming with promise.

Vita

Lisa Brodie Williams was born in Paterson, New Jersey, but grew up in Virginia. She received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from Longwood University in May 1991. From 1996 to he was employed as an English teacher at Kecoughtan High School (Hampton, VA), Germantown High School (Shelby County, TN), and Clover Hill High School (Chesterfield, VA). She is currently teaching English and serves as department chair at Maggie L. Walker Governor's School in Richmond, Virginia. In September, 2007, she entered the Graduate School at Virginia Commonwealth University.

